
CRUSADER

FIRST WORLD

RICO VIDAL

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First Edition

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FOREWORD

This book is dedicated to the memory of **Edward Wilton III**, a warrior, a patriot, and a true **Crusader** in every sense of the word. He was more than a soldier—he was a man who believed in something greater than himself. He did not fight for glory, nor for recognition, but for principle.

Edward was not born into war, yet he chose it. He did not have to go to Ukraine, but when the call of duty sounded, when tyranny sought to extinguish the flame of freedom, **he stood up and answered**. He crossed into a foreign land, not as a conqueror, but as a defender of Western democracy, of the values we hold sacred—liberty, justice, and the unwavering belief that all men and women should have the right to choose their own destiny.

His courage did not waver in the face of Russian aggression. Where others may have turned back, Edward advanced. Where darkness threatened to spread, he became the light. He fought, he endured, and ultimately, **he fell defending not**

only the people of Ukraine but the very ideals upon which our civilization stands.

His sacrifice is not just a footnote in history; it is a testament to the unbreakable bond between free nations, between those who believe that tyranny cannot and will not prevail. Edward Wilton III now rests among the great warriors who came before him, those who laid down their lives so that others might live free.

This book stands as both a tribute and a reminder—that men like Edward exist, that their fight is never in vain, and that as long as we remember them, their cause lives on.

For Edward Wilton III. For Ukraine. For freedom.

Rest easy, Crusader. Your battle is won.

THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

It is the year 2013. Ukraine stands at a crossroads. In the heart of Kyiv, citizens rise up in protest. President Yanukovich's sudden decision to forsake an alliance with the European Union in favor of a shadowy pact with Russia ignites the flames of rebellion. Frustration over rampant corruption, economic stagnation, and the desire for a more democratic and prosperous future drive thousands to the streets. What begins as a peaceful demand for change soon transforms into a heroic struggle for the nation's soul.

As the protests escalate, the government's brutal crackdown on demonstrators only fuels the fire. Clashes between security forces and citizens intensify, resulting in bloodshed and loss. The resilience of the Ukrainian people leads to the toppling of Yanukovich's regime, but the victory is short-lived as chaos ensues. Seizing the moment, the forces of Russia move swiftly, annexing the strategic region of Crimea in March 2014. This bold move, accompanied by unmarked Russian troops and a controversial referendum, is condemned by the international community.

In the east, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk fall under the sway of pro-Russian separatists. The fierce and bloody struggle for control begins, with Ukraine caught in a deadly conflict. Despite valiant efforts and fragile ceasefires, peace remains elusive, and the land is scarred by war.

Then, in the fateful year of 2022, darkness descends once more. Russia, driven by imperialistic ambitions and a desire to crush Ukraine's sovereign right to join NATO, launches a full-scale invasion. Under the leadership of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's brave stand for freedom and democracy faces a brutal onslaught. The invasion threatens the sovereignty of Ukraine and sparks a global outcry. The courage of the Ukrainian people, facing overwhelming odds, inspires international solidarity. Nations around the world unite in condemnation, imposing severe economic sanctions on Russia and providing substantial military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. As battles rage across cities and countryside, the world's eyes turn to this epic struggle for freedom and survival. The fate of Ukraine hangs in the balance, and the resolve of its people will determine the future of not only their nation but the very fabric of global order...

The sky, a dark canvas streaked with flashes of tracer rounds and explosions, casting an eerie glow...

"Hold the line!" Edward shouted over the deafening noise, his voice raw with determination. He fired his rifle, the recoil jarring his shoulder, each shot a precise attempt to push back the advancing enemy. Rico, his face smeared with grime and sweat, was beside him, systematically picking off targets with deadly accuracy. Trevor was at the far end, a grim expression of resolve etched on his face as he unleashed a relentless barrage from his machine gun, mowing down any who dared to approach.

Before the battle reached its fever pitch, Edmund caught sight of her. She had been fighting alongside them, but the situation was growing increasingly dire. "You need to go!" Edward shouted, his voice tinged with desperation.

"No, I won't leave you," she cried back, her voice firm despite the chaos.

"You have to go! Take it! Take it.. Edmund's voice trembled with intensity, his eyes locked fiercely onto hers. She froze, heart pounding, torn between staying and fleeing. But then he leaned close, his voice dropping to a whisper, saying something only she could hear. Whatever he said made her eyes widen, and her breath catch—a secret, a promise, something only they would ever know.

She grabbed his arm, her voice urgent. "Don't be a hero Eli, You've done enough. Please—"

"Move!" he roared, shaking her out of her hesitation.

Her hand slipped from his arm, and she stepped back, her eyes lingering on him a moment longer. "Come back to me," she whispered, then turned and disappeared into the shadows, leaving Edmund to face the storm alone.

Wave after wave of Russian soldiers fell before them, the ground littered with bodies. Some of the enemy were unarmed, forced to the front lines by their commanders in a desperate bid to overwhelm Edmund and his team. Yet, each attempt was met with fierce resistance. The trio moved with practiced precision, covering each other seamlessly, their camaraderie evident in every coordinated action.

Edmund ducked behind the wall and reloaded his rifle, his hands moving with practiced efficiency. He peeked over the edge, spotting a group of Russians advancing. With a deep breath, he aimed and fired, the bullets finding their marks with deadly precision. Each shot was a small victory, the soldiers falling like marionettes with their strings cut.

Rico, positioned to Edmund's left, smirked as he took down an enemy sniper with a single, well-placed shot. "Toma cabrón" he murmured, a hint of Puerto Rican pride in his voice. He swung his rifle around, picking off another soldier with a clean headshot. The soldier's helmet flying off as he crumpled to the ground.

Trevor, on the far right, was a one-man army. His machine gun roared, spitting out a hail of bullets that tore through the advancing soldiers. His bullets found their targets, bodies dropping in waves before his relentless firepower.

Despite their efforts, they were not alone in this struggle. Several other soldiers fought alongside them, their presence a testament to their shared cause. One by one, they began to fall. A young soldier next to Edmund took a bullet to the chest, his body crumpling lifelessly to the ground. Another, barely out of his teens, was caught in the crossfire, his scream cut short by a sniper's bullet. The grim reality of their last stand was becoming all too clear.

"More Ruskies comin in!" Trevor yelled, his voice carrying over the chaos. Edmund's eyes scanned the horizon, spotting more Russian soldiers advancing, some clutching weapons, others forced into the fray with nothing but fear in their eyes. The sight only fueled his determination. He

and his team were a bastion of resistance, their effectiveness so undeniable that the enemy's desperation grew with each failed assault.

Suddenly, the shrill whine of approaching drones pierced the chaos. "Drones!" Trevor shouted again. The trio scrambled for cover as the first drone unleashed a volley of gunfire, tearing through the air where they had just been standing. Edmund felt the ground shudder beneath him as another explosion rocked their position, sending debris flying.

Edmund rolled to his side, dodging a rain of bullets. He raised his rifle and fired, the bullets soaring through the air in slow motion. Each shot hit its mark, the drones spiraling down in flames. Rico, not to be outdone, took out a drone with a perfectly timed shot, its wreckage falling like a comet from the sky.

Despite the relentless pressure, Edmund, Rico, and Trevor held their ground, their combined firepower decimating the enemy ranks. The battlefield became a testament to their skill and resolve, Russian soldiers falling one after another. The realization dawned on the enemy command that conventional means were futile against these formidable defenders. Yet, for every enemy they felled, they lost another of their own. A soldier to Trevor's right was blown apart by a

grenade, his body flung like a ragdoll. Another, behind Trevor, was caught by machine gun fire, his lifeless body slumping against the wall.

Time seemed to slow as Edmund, Rico, and Trevor continued their deadly dance, every motion precise and calculated. The air was thick with the smell of gunpowder and the cries of the fallen. Edmund felt a strange sense of clarity, each breath, each heartbeat magnified. The Russian soldiers fell in droves, their attempts to break through met with brutal efficiency.

Trevor's machine gun clicked empty. With a swift motion, he reloaded, his eyes never leaving the battlefield. "More where that came from.." The air was thick with the acrid smell of gunpowder and the sharp tang of sweat. With practiced precision, he slid a fresh magazine into the weapon, his hands moving with a calm efficiency that belied the chaos surrounding him. The distant hum of gunfire and the occasional thud of explosions formed a backdrop to his focused concentration. Each click and snap of the reloading process seemed to echo in the tense silence between bursts.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Edmund saw it—a mortar shell, arcing through the sky with deadly precision. Time seemed to slow even further, each second stretching into eternity. The

battlefield fell into an eerie silence, the only sound the distant whine of incoming mortars. The shadow of death loomed over them, darkening the sky.

"Incoming!" Edmund screamed, but his voice seemed to vanish into the void of chaos around him. He watched, helplessly, as the mortars descended, their trajectories clear and unstoppable. The first impact was a blinding flash of light, followed by a deafening explosion. The ground shook violently, throwing Edmund off balance.

In the flashes of light, Edmund saw disjointed images: the sinister face of a man with a prosthetic jaw, a man who seemed to relish chaos; a cinematic memory of Captain Kurpaso breaking out of a Russian prison alongside hundreds of other prisoners, running through the gates to freedom. Edmund felt the searing pain of a gunshot wound, but Captain Kurpaso picked him up, carrying him to safety. As Edmund looked at Kurpaso's face, it morphed and changed into Trevor Davison, shaking him awake.

With a jolt, Edmund woke up, drenched in sweat, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His heart pounded as if it were trying to escape his chest, the vivid remnants of the nightmare still

clinging to his mind. He sat up, the darkness of his room a stark contrast to the chaotic battlefield. It took him several moments to remember where he was, the line between dream and reality slowly reasserting itself.

CHAPTER ONE

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

“Eli, get up bud! We're late for PT! We need to go, yesterday!” Trevor's urgent voice snapped him fully back to reality. Edmund shook off the lingering images of his nightmare, his heart still racing, and quickly got to his feet.

Edmund and Trevor scrambled around the barracks, quickly packing their gear and changing into their PT uniforms. The room was a chaotic mess of clothes, empty beer bottles, and the lingering smell of last night's escapades. Edmund fumbled with his boots, pulling them on with urgency.

"That was one hell of a night." Trevor said, glancing back at the cot where Macy was just getting up.

Macy, a young woman with disheveled hair, stumbled out of the cot. She quickly adjusted her clothes and gave Trevor a quick peck on the cheek. "See you around, Trev, Thanks for the memorable night," she said with a playful wink.

"Thanks for not making it awkward, Macy!" Trent called out as she slipped out the back door, making a discreet exit.

Edmund and Trevor finally burst out of the barracks, hastily pulling on their gear as they sprinted down the path toward the training grounds. The cold morning air was a stark contrast to the warmth of their beds, and the urgency of their situation sobered them quickly. They exchanged glances, the memory of the previous night's antics flashing in their minds.

"Man, I haven't felt this rough since basic training," Edmund said, grimacing as they ran.

"You think this is bad? You don't remember that weekend in New Orleans?" Trevor shot back, a grin spreading across his face despite the urgency.

Edmund chuckled, wincing as a stitch started to form in his side. "Barely. That's the problem."

As they neared the training grounds, they could see the rest of their platoon already assembled and in formation. The sergeant, a hulking figure with a voice that could command mountains, was pacing back and forth. His eyes locked onto Edmund and Trevor as they skidded to a halt, trying to compose themselves.

"Where the hell have you two been?" the sergeant roared, his face turning an impressive shade of red. "Do you think PT waits for your beauty sleep?"

Edmund and Trevor exchanged a quick look, their faces flushing. "No, Sir!" Edmund managed to stammer out, trying to sound as sincere as possible while catching his breath.

The sergeant's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring as he stepped closer and sniffed the air. It was clear he knew exactly what they had been up to. Without saying a word, he pointed to the ground. "Drop and give me fifty!"

Edmund and Trevor immediately dropped to the ground and began their push-ups, sweat already starting to bead on their foreheads. The rest of

the platoon watched with barely contained amusement as the sergeant continued his tirade.

As they counted off their push-ups, Edmund's mind drifted back to the rigorous training schedules at Fort Benning. Every day was a test of their endurance and commitment.

"Twenty-five!" Trent grunted beside him, his face red with effort.

"Keep going," Edmund urged, pushing through the burn in his arms.

After what felt like an eternity, they finally finished their push-ups and got to their feet, joining the rest of their comrades in formation. The seriousness of PT grounded them as the morning sun began to rise. The sergeant's voice faded into the background as they focused on their exercises, the camaraderie and shared experience of military life bringing them back into the fold.

During a brief water break, Dirk Brown, a fellow private, sidled up to them, a smirk on his face. "Heard you two had quite the night."

"Yeah, well, some of us know how to have fun," Trevor shot back, wiping sweat from his brow.

The private laughed. "Just make sure you don't make a habit of it. The sarge's got it in for you now."

"We'll be fine," Edmund said, taking a deep gulp of water. "Just need to keep our heads down and get through this."

As they resumed their training, Edmund felt a sense of camaraderie with his fellow soldiers. Despite the rough start, the shared experience of PT and the bond of brotherhood in arms helped him push through. The exercises, though grueling, were a reminder of why they were there and the discipline required to be a part of something greater.

By the end of the session, Edmund and Trevor were exhausted but relieved. The sergeant called them all to attention, his stern expression softening just a fraction. "Good work today, everyone. Dismissed!"

"Next time, let's stick to soda," Edmund suggested, clapping Trevor on the back.

"Agreed," Trevor laughed.

Edmund grinned.

With that, they returned to their routine, the memory of their wild night serving as a lesson and a fond reminder of their resilience and camaraderie. As they prepared for the day ahead, the lingering scent of sweat and laughter hung in the air, a testament to the bonds forged in both adversity and celebration.

Edmund and Trevor hurried to the mess hall at Fort Benning, Georgia, after their grueling morning PT. The aroma of bacon, eggs, and coffee was a welcome change from the cold, early morning air. They grabbed their trays and sat down with a few of their friends, enjoying the brief respite before the day's training continued.

"That PT session was brutal," Edmund, known as Eli to his friends, said, rubbing his sore muscles.

"No kidding," Trevor replied, his face still flushed from the exertion. "I feel like I got hit by a truck."

Eli laughed. "At least the coffee is decent. Maybe it'll wake us up."

They settled into their seats, savoring the warm food and the brief moments of camaraderie. The mess hall was bustling with activity, soldiers chatting and laughing, the clatter of trays and

utensils creating a familiar, comforting background noise. It was a stark contrast to the punishing drills they had just endured outside.

"Did you hear about the new training exercise they're planning next week?" one of their friends, Lance Corporal Michael, asked, joining them at the table.

Trevor raised an eyebrow. "Nope, what's the deal?"

"Word is, it's going to be a multi-day field exercise," Michael replied. "We're going to be using anti-drone weaponry to fight off simulated drone attacks."

Eli groaned. "Great. Just what we need—more ways to get yelled at by the lieutenant. Not that I'll be here for it."

Trevor looked surprised. "Oh yeah, your contract's up soon, right?"

Eli nodded. "Yeah, in a week. I probably won't be around for the fun and games. Trying to figure out what's next."

Michael smirked, leaning in. "So, Eli, what's next for you?"

Not like you can do anything else right."

Eli shrugged, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I've been thinking about going to law school. I want to do something with meaning, you know? Something with a greater purpose."

Trevor burst out laughing. "A lawyer? You? Come on, Eli, you can barely keep your boots tied."

Emund grinned, shaking his head. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. Just you wait."

Before Emund could respond, the door to the mess hall slammed open, and Sergeant John "Bulldog" Turner stormed in with his posse. His imposing figure cast a long shadow across the room, and his sharp blue eyes scanned the hall with an intensity that made everyone pause mid-bite.

Edmund nudged Trevor. "Uh-oh, looks like someone's in a bad mood."

Trevor glanced over and his eyes widened slightly.

But Sergeant John had already spotted them. He marched over, his face a mask of fury. "Davison! I

need a word," he barked, his booming voice echoing through the hall.

Trevor and Edmund exchanged a quick look before getting up, their friends watching with a mix of curiosity and concern. As they approached, Sergeant John didn't waste any time.

"Macy was seen leaving your bunk this morning, Davis," he growled.

Trevor blinked, feigning innocence. "Macy? Uh, no, Sergeant. I think you've got the wrong guy."

"Don't play dumb with me!" John snapped. "You think I wouldn't find out? Macy's my girl!"

Edmund winced, sensing the impending explosion. Trevor, however, couldn't resist a smirk. "Well, Sergeant, I'm not saying Macy was with me last night, but if Macy was with me last night, I guess she made the right choice," he said with a chuckle. "I mean, she clearly knows where the fun is, Sarge."

The room went silent as John's face turned an impressive shade of red. Before anyone could react, John's fist connected with Trent's jaw, sending him sprawling into a nearby table. Trays

clattered to the floor, and food flew in all directions.

"Hey!" Edmund shouted, stepping forward to help Trevor up. But it was too late. The mess hall erupted into chaos.

John's posse, a group of equally imposing soldiers, jumped in to back him up, while Edmund and Trevor's friends rallied to their side. Food trays became makeshift shields, and eggs, toast, and pancakes turned into projectiles. The air was filled with the sounds of shouting, laughter, and the splattering of food.

Trevor, rubbing his sore jaw, grabbed a handful of mashed potatoes and flung them at John, hitting him squarely in the face. "How's that for breakfast, Bulldog?" he laughed.

Edmund, trying to keep the situation from spiraling completely out of control, couldn't help but get caught up in the madness. He ducked as a flying sausage narrowly missed his head and retaliated by tossing a cup of orange juice at one of John's friends.

The mess hall was a war zone of flying food. Soldiers were slipping on spilled coffee and sliding through puddles of syrup. Pancakes were

being launched like frisbees, and cups of milk and juice were arcing through the air, leaving trails of liquid behind. Everyone forgot their military discipline for a few moments of chaotic fun.

Just as the situation seemed to reach its peak, the door swung open again, and Captain Pierce stormed in with the military police, his face a mixture of shock and fury. His whistle blew sharply, cutting through the chaos.

"Enough!" he bellowed, his voice commanding immediate attention. "What in the name of all that's holy is going on here?"

The room fell silent, soldiers freezing mid-throw and mid-laugh. Edmund and Trevor exchanged sheepish glances as they wiped food from their faces. John stood rigid, still seething but knowing better than to cross the captain.

Captain Pierce scanned the mess hall, his eyes landing on the main culprits. "I want this place cleaned up and every one of you in my office by 0800. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!" the soldiers chorused, scrambling to start cleaning up the mess.

As they mopped up the remnants of the food fight, Trevor leaned over to Edmund. "I don't think he likes me very much."

When the clock struck 0800, Edmund, Trevor, and the rest of the soldiers involved in the food fight gathered outside Captain Pierce's office, waiting for their turn to be reprimanded. The tension in the air was palpable as they shuffled in one by one, each receiving a stern lecture and their respective punishments.

Captain Pierce sat behind his desk, his stern expression unyielding as he addressed the soldiers. "Private Miller, you'll be on latrine duty for the next two weeks," he said, his voice cold and authoritative.

"Yes, sir," Miller replied, a look of resignation on his face as he left the office.

"Corporal Jenkins, you'll be scrubbing the barracks floors every evening for the next week," Captain Pierce continued.

"Understood, sir," Jenkins responded, his shoulders slumping as he exited.

The line moved slowly, each soldier receiving a similar fate. When it was finally Trevor's turn,

Captain Pierce leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing. "Davison, you instigated this mess. You're on mess hall cleanup duty for the next month. Maybe that will remind you to keep your hands to yourself."

Trevor nodded, trying to suppress a smirk. "Aye, sir."

"Dismissed," Pierce said curtly, waving him off.

Edmund stepped forward, ready for his turn. "Wilson, you're no stranger to trouble, but I expected better from you. You're on janitorial duty for the remainder of your contract. Maybe you can put that energy to better use."

"Yes, sir," Edmund replied, his tone respectful.

"Everyone else, dismissed," Captain Pierce barked. The soldiers filed out, leaving Eli alone in the office.

"Wilson, stay a moment," Pierce said, his voice softer now.

Edmund remained standing at attention, curiosity piqued. "Sir?"

Pierce leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Eli, you've got potential kid. You're a good soldier... It would be a shame to see you go. Have you considered re-enlisting?"

Edmund hesitated, the thought of law school and a new future on his mind. "I have, sir, but I'm also thinking about going to law school."

Pierce nodded thoughtfully. "I understand that... But the Army could still use someone with your skills and dedication... Think about it. The door is always open, soldier."

Edmund nodded. "I appreciate that, sir. I'll think it over."

"Good," Pierce said, standing up. "Dismissed, Wilton."

As Edmund left the office, he saw Sergeant John "Bulldog" Turner striding inside, his face still flushed with anger. Their eyes briefly met as Edmund left the building.

Edmund's future was uncertain, but he knew that whatever path he chose, he would face it with the same determination and resilience that had carried him through his time in the Army..

CHAPTER TWO

GOD, FAMILY AND COUNTRY

Edward "Edmund" Wilson III found himself on janitorial duty for the remainder of his contract at Fort Benning. The punishment was harsh, but Edmund understood why it was necessary. The food fight had been an unfortunate lapse in discipline, and now he had to pay the price. He approached his new duties with a sense of duty and responsibility, knowing that serving his country meant more than just the glory of the battlefield.

Each morning, Edmund began his duties at dawn. The early light filtered through the narrow windows of the barracks, casting long shadows on the floor as he methodically cleaned. He swept every corner, ensuring no speck of dust was left behind.

One of his tasks was cleaning the latrines, a job no one envied. The smell was often unbearable, and the sight of overflowing toilets was enough to make anyone gag. Edmund donned gloves and a mask, scrubbing every inch until the porcelain gleamed.

In addition to the latrines, Edmund was responsible for taking out the trash. The large dumpsters behind the mess hall were heavy and reeked of rotting food. He struggled with the weight, muscles straining as he lifted the overflowing bags. Despite the physical toll, Edmund never complained..

One morning, while scrubbing a particularly stubborn stain in the administration building's hallway, Edmund overheard a flurry of activity. Soldiers were gathering in the lounge, murmurs of concern and urgency in their voices. Intrigued, Edmund finished his task and made his way over, wiping his hands on his fatigues.

The television was blaring with breaking news. Russia had invaded Ukraine. The date was February 24, 2022. The images on the screen showed explosions, tanks rolling through streets, and civilians fleeing their homes. The room was filled with a mix of disbelief and anger.

"Can you believe this?" Miller, one of Edmund's friends, said, shaking his head. "This is huge...

Edmund nodded, watching the screen intently. The invasion was a significant event, and he could see the gears turning in his fellow soldiers' minds as they considered the implications. Conversations buzzed around him, speculating about potential deployments and the broader impact on global security.

Despite his grueling janitorial duties, the news from Ukraine provided a jolt of energy. As he scrubbed floors and emptied trash bins, Edmund couldn't help but think about the soldiers and civilians caught in the conflict. Each day brought new reports of battles, bombings, and acts of resistance. The base was abuzz with strategic discussions and a heightened sense of readiness.

One evening, as Edmund was winding down from a long day of work, his phone rang. It was his girlfriend, Jennifer Smith.

"Hey, Eli!" Jennifer's voice was always a soothing balm at the end of a long day. "Have you heard about the invasion? It's all over the news."

"Yeah, I've been hearing about it non-stop," Edmund replied, his voice more upbeat. "It's crazy what's happening over there. I can't believe it's actually happening."

"I know, right? It's like something out of a movie," Jennifer said. "How are things on base? Everyone must be talking about it."

"Absolutely," Edmund said. "Everyone's buzzing about what's next, what it means for us. But it's moments like this that remind me why we do what we do. We're here to be ready for anything."

Jennifer laughed lightly. "You always know how to stay positive, Eli."

"Well, someone's got to keep the spirits up," Edmund replied with a chuckle. "How was your day?"

"It was pretty hectic," Jennifer admitted. "We had a major project due, and everyone was running around like crazy. But, we pulled it off."

"That's great to hear."

"Thanks, Eli. I can't wait for Thanksgiving. Just a few more days, and we'll be together," Jennifer said warmly.

"Same here. I miss you," Edmund responded, feeling a warmth spread through him.

"Oh, by the way, remember I told you about that big promotion? Well, my boss wants me to take on more responsibility. It's exciting but also a bit overwhelming," Jennifer admitted, her tone shifting slightly.

Edmund's smile faded a bit, concern creeping into his voice. "More responsibility? Are they giving you enough support for that?"

Jennifer sighed. "Not really. It's going to be a challenge, but I think I can handle it."

"Just don't let them overwork you, okay? You're amazing, but you need to take care of yourself too," Edmund said gently.

"I will, Eli. Promise. Now, get some rest. We'll talk tomorrow," Jennifer reassured him.

Those calls gave Edmund something to look forward to, a reminder that there was a world beyond the base, waiting for him. Jennifer's texts

throughout the day also brought a smile to his face, providing brief moments of joy amidst the drudgery of his tasks.

The next day, Edmund found himself mopping the floors of the mess hall. He noticed a group of soldiers huddled around a tablet. Trevor Davison, was holding it, and the group seemed deeply engrossed.

"What's going on?" Edmund asked, pausing his mopping.

Trevor looked up, eyes wide with excitement. "Check this out, Eli. There's this Ukrainian soldier named Valkyrie, real name Julia Tulipa. She's a volunteer fighter from Russia who joined the Ukrainian forces."

"Damn, a Russian fighting Russians," another soldier remarked, peering over Trevor's shoulder.

"Yeah," Trevor continued, scrolling through the article. "She's been fighting with them since 2014. There's a video here of her pulling a teammate out of enemy fire over there," Trevor chuckled lightly as he said, "It's the real shit."

Trevor tapped the screen, and the video began to play. The footage was grainy, but it clearly

showed Valkyrie moving with incredible speed and precision under heavy fire. She dashed into the fray, grabbed her wounded comrade, and dragged him to safety while bullets zipped past her. Her fearless actions in the heat of battle were nothing short of heroic.

"Look at that," Trevor said, shaking his head in admiration. "She just goes right in, No crap given.

"Yeah," another soldier added. "She's known for doing stuff like that. That's why they call her Valkyrie."

Edmund felt a surge of inspiration as he watched the video. Valkyrie's story was one of courage and resilience. Despite the dangers and challenges, she chose to stand up for what she believed in, fighting for a country that wasn't even her own by birth. It struck a chord with Edmund, whose mother was of Ukrainian descent. The thought of his heritage and the current struggle of his ancestral homeland filled him with a deep sense of connection and purpose.

"Valkyrie" had chosen her fight, stepping into battle for a cause that wasn't even hers by birth. Edmund wondered if he had that same conviction. He had signed up young, driven by duty, by the need for structure, by the simple

belief in serving something bigger than himself. But now, that chapter was closing.

The mess hall noise droned on around him, but Edmund was elsewhere, still staring at the paused frame on Trevor Davison's tablet—Valkyrie, crouched beside her wounded teammate, shielding him as gunfire cracked in the background. He exhaled, then handed the tablet back to Trevor.

"That's something else," he muttered.

Trevor nodded, sliding the tablet away. "Yeah, man."

Edmund didn't say anything else. He finished his food in silence, listening to the usual banter but not really hearing it. For years, this had been his life—mess halls, drills, orders, the ever-present hum of military discipline. And tomorrow, it would be over.

Morning came too soon.

Edmund stood in front of the mirror in his barracks, adjusting the collar of his uniform one last time. The others were still asleep, their snores blending with the distant sounds of early morning activity outside.

For a brief moment, he hesitated. He had been counting down the days, waiting for this moment—but now that it was here, the finality of it settled in his chest like a weight. No more formations. No more orders. No more military certainty. Just... whatever came next.

He ran a hand through his hair, squared his shoulders, and grabbed his packed duffel bag.

By the time he arrived at Captain Pierce's office, the sun had begun its slow climb over the horizon, casting long shadows across the base. This was it.

"You've served well, Wilson," Captain Pierce says, extending his hand. "Good luck out there."

Edmund stands at attention, then shakes the captain's hand firmly. "Thank you, sir," he replies, feeling a mixture of pride and bittersweet farewell.

With his papers in hand and the formalities behind him, Edmund steps out of the office. The sunlight feels different on his face, the air crisper. The weight of his service lifts from his shoulders, replaced by the uncertainty and excitement of civilian life. No longer Corporal

Wilson, he is simply Edmund, a civilian ready to embrace his future.

Finally, Edmund's contract came to an end, He had an old car, a faithful companion since his early days in the army. It was rusty in places, but it had character and got him where he needed to go. He packed his bags, handed over his last set of duties, and drove off the base with a sense of liberation.

He picked up Jennifer from her apartment. She was waiting outside, ready to spend Thanksgiving with him and his family.

"Hey, Eli!" she called out as he pulled up.

"Hey, Jen! Hop in," Edmund replied, stepping out to greet her.

As they drove towards his family home, the conversation flowed easily between them.

"How was your last day?" Jennifer asked, glancing at him.

"Busy, but it felt good to finally be done," Edmund said, a grin spreading across his face. "I'm ready for some downtime."

Jennifer smiled. "You deserve it. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Jen. It's been a long time coming," Edmund replied. "How was your day?"

"Pretty hectic," Jennifer said. "We had a major project due, and everyone was running around like crazy. But, we pulled it off."

"That's awesome. You always manage to pull through," Edmund said, giving her a warm smile.

As they approached his family home, the conversation shifted to lighter topics. They reminisced about their first date and shared stories from their time apart. The familiar sights of his hometown brought a sense of nostalgia to Edmund.

Arriving at his childhood home, Edmund was greeted by the warm, comforting smells of a Thanksgiving feast. His mother's hug was tight and tearful. "Eli!" she shouted.

"It's good to be home, Mom," Edmund replied, feeling a wave of relief wash over him.

Jennifer stepped forward, smiling warmly. "It's so nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Wilson."

"It's lovely to meet you too, Jennifer," Anna said, embracing her. "Thank you for coming."

Dinner was a joyful affair, filled with laughter and stories. Edmund's father, a retired Army veteran, listened intently to his son's tales from the base, pride evident in his eyes.

"You've served well," his father said, raising a glass. "I'm proud of you, son."

"Thanks, Dad," Edmund replied, grateful for the affirmation. "Just trying to do my part."

"Tell us more about your time at Fort Benning," his sister Clara chimed in, passing the mashed potatoes.

Edmund smiled. "Well, it's been intense. Training, drills, and of course, the news from Ukraine. Everyone on base is talking about it."

His mother, Anna, looked up from her plate, concern etched on her face. "I worry about your Uncle Yuri every day. He's still there, you know. Refuses to leave. Says he has to defend his home."

Edmund nodded. "It's brave of him. A lot of people are staying to fight."

"Yuri's always been stubborn," his father added, shaking his head. "But I understand. If it were my home, I wouldn't leave either."

As the conversation turned to the war in Ukraine, Edward's girlfriend, Jennifer, who had been quietly picking at her food, glanced up occasionally, her expression distant.

"She's incredible. A Russian fighting for Ukraine. She saved a teammate in Mariupol, one of the hardest-hit areas," Edmund continued, his voice animated.

"What happened?" Clara asked, leaning in.

"It was during one of the heavy shellings," Edmund explained. "Her unit was pinned down by Russian artillery in the Azovstal Steel Plant. One of her teammates was hit and pinned down. Without caring, she just ran through the debris and gunfire, dragged him to cover, and provided first aid until they could get him to a medic. All while under fire."

Jennifer gave a polite nod but seemed more focused on the glass of wine in front of her, swirling it absentmindedly.

"People are resilient," Clara said softly. "It's amazing what they can do when they have to."

Anna sighed. "I just hope this ends soon. I can't bear the thought of losing Yuri. He's been through so much already."

Edmund reached out, squeezing his mother's hand. "We'll keep praying for him, Mom. And for everyone over there."

As the meal continued, Edmund found his thoughts drifting. The stories of bravery and resilience from Ukraine resonated deeply with him. The idea of going over there to help began to form in his mind.

Later, as the family gathered around the fire, the conversation turned to Edmund's future. "So, Eli, what are you doing now?" Clara asked.

Edmund took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about going to Ukraine. To help out, somehow."

The room fell silent.

"Im not sure though, just thinking about it..." Edmund added.

His mother's face turned pale. "No, Edmund. You have your whole life ahead of you. You could go to law school. The GI Bill can cover the expenses. You could do so much more here."

"I know, Mom," Edmund replied, his voice steady. "But seeing what's happening over there, I feel like I need to do something... That's where we came from..."

Anna shook her head, her voice rising. "But why, Edmund? Why put yourself in that kind of danger? You've done your duty."

"Because this isn't just about us, Mom," Edmund said, his tone firm. "If Russia wins in Ukraine, they won't stop there... They'll keep pushing into other countries."

Anna chuckled, as if not even considering the idea. "You are not going."

"They'll send you directly to the front and use you as a meatshield! Don't be an idiot!" his father added, his voice rising. "Do you think they're going to see you as anything more than cannon fodder?"

Jennifer sat silently, her discomfort evident as the tension in the room escalated.

Edmund shot back, his own anger flaring, "These are people fighting for freedom. They're not just cannon fodder! We gotta help them!"

The room was thick with tension. His father's expression hardened. "Edmund, this isn't a game. You think you're just going to waltz in there and be a hero? It's war. Real people die for a can of tuna!"

Edmund stood his ground, the conviction in his voice unwavering. "I know it's dangerous, but we can't let fear stop us from doing what's right."

Sensing the need to defuse the situation, Clara, changed the topic. "Why don't we have some dessert?" he suggested, trying to bring some calm back to the room.

Jennifer quickly nodded, "Great Idea!" standing up to help Anna with the pie. "I'll help serve!," she said softly, trying to ease the tension.

The argument gradually gave way to a more subdued atmosphere as they shared slices of pumpkin pie. The earlier tension lingered, but they managed to find moments of levity as they reminisced about past holidays.

As they cleared the table and said their goodbyes, Clara held Edmund close for a long moment. "Just promise me you'll be careful, whatever you decide."

"I promise, Clara," Edmund replied, feeling the weight of her words.

Edmund took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his family's emotions and the gravity of his decision. He opened the front door and stepped out into the crisp night air, the cool breeze a stark contrast to the warmth inside. Jennifer was right beside him.

The stars above shone brightly, illuminating their path as they walked down the familiar driveway. The memories of the evening, the intense discussions, and the heartfelt hugs lingered in his mind. As he reached the end of the driveway, Edmund turned back one last time to see his family standing in the doorway, their silhouettes framed by the warm glow of the house. He gave them a reassuring nod, then turned and walked away, Jennifer's hand in his, carrying with him the love and support of those he cherished most.

CHAPTER THREE

FIRST WORLD APOCALYPSE

A week after the intense family dinner, Edmund found himself aimlessly wandering around his apartment. The conversation about Ukraine had sparked something inside him, a deep curiosity that wouldn't leave him alone. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but he knew he needed to understand more about the situation. Instead of spending his time looking for a job as he had promised Jennifer, Edmund found himself drawn to the idea of the International Legion in Ukraine.

He sat down at his laptop, intending to browse a few job listings, but his fingers hesitated over the keyboard. With a sigh, he typed in

“International Legion Ukraine” instead. The screen filled with articles, interviews, and videos about the volunteers who had joined the fight. Some were seasoned veterans, others were civilians with no military background, but all were united by a common cause.

As Edmund read through the stories, a sense of purpose began to stir within him. He wasn’t decided on anything, but the idea of going to Ukraine to fight for something greater than himself felt... compelling. He couldn’t shake the thought.

His phone buzzed on the desk, and he glanced at it briefly before ignoring the call. It was another follow-up from a recruiter, probably wondering why he hadn’t submitted his application yet. But Edmund couldn’t focus on job hunting. Not when there was something far more interesting pulling at him.

The rest of the morning was spent diving deeper into the world of the International Legion. He read articles, watched videos, and even considered heading to the shooting range to practice his marksmanship—a skill that he hadn’t used much since leaving the military. Eventually, he gave in to the urge and spent a few hours at the range, reacquainting himself with the feel of a gun in his hand. It felt good to be

back in that environment, even if he wasn't entirely sure why he was doing it.

By the time he returned home, he was no closer to making any decisions, but the hours he spent at the range had left him with a strange sense of calm. Still, he knew he was avoiding the real issue—finding a job and preparing for college.

By the time Edmund returned to the apartment, the sun was beginning to set. He entered quietly, hoping Jennifer wouldn't notice how he had spent his day. But as soon as he walked through the door, he could tell something was off.

Jennifer was sitting on the couch, her arms crossed, her eyes fixed on him with a mixture of frustration and disappointment.

"Where have you been?" she asked, her voice calm but laced with tension.

"Just out," Edmund replied, trying to sound casual. "did some research, then went to the range..."

"Research?" Jennifer's eyebrows shot up. "On jobs?"

Edmund hesitated, knowing this conversation was about to take a turn. “Not exactly... I was looking into the International Legion.”

Jennifer’s face fell. “Are you serious, Eli? I thought we agreed you’d focus on finding a job, getting your life back on track. But instead, you’re wasting your time with this?”

“I’m not wasting my time,” Edmund protested, feeling his defenses rise. “I’m just... interested. I need to know more before I make any decisions.”

“Interested?” Jennifer echoed, her frustration mounting. “You’re supposed to be planning our future, not fantasizing about going off to fight in some war! Do you even realize how ridiculous this is?”

“It’s not ridiculous!” Edmund retorted, his anger rising. “This is about something real, something that actually matters..

Jennifer stood up, her voice trembling with emotion. “And what about us, Eli? What about our plans? You promised you’d find a job, settle down. But instead, you’re acting like some reckless teenager with a death wish!”

Edmund felt the sting of her words but refused to back down. "I'm not acting reckless. I'm just exploring my options..."

"Exploring your options?" Jennifer's voice cracked as tears welled up in her eyes. "This isn't just about you, Eli. It's about us. And right now, it feels like you don't care about us at all."

Without waiting for his response, Jennifer stormed off to the bedroom, leaving Edmund standing alone in the living room. The weight of her words heavy on his shoulders. As she disappeared down the hallway, Edmund clenched his fists, frustration boiling over. Without a word, he grabbed his jacket, threw it on, and stormed out of the apartment.

Out on the street, the cool evening air did little to calm him. He felt restless, his mind swirling with frustration and confusion. Needing an escape, he pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts before calling Trevor.

"Hey, what's up?" Trevor answered, his voice easygoing.

"Not much," Edmund replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "Got into a fight with Jen. I need to get out of the house. You up for a few drinks?"

There was a pause on the other end before Trevor responded. “Yeah, man. I’m down. Meet me at the usual spot?”

“Sounds good. I’ll be there in twenty,” Edmund said, already feeling a bit of relief at the thought of having some beers with an old friend.

“See you then,” Trevor replied before hanging up.

Later that evening, Edmund met up with Trevor at their favorite bar. It was a routine they’d established—catch up, share some laughs, and unwind. Tonight, though, Edmund was more on edge than usual, the fight with Jennifer still fresh in his mind.

After they ordered their drinks, Trevor leaned in, noticing the tension in Edmund’s posture. “So, what’s really going on, man? What’s eating at you?”

Edmund hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about going to Ukraine man. You know, joining the International Legion.”

Trevor looked at him, eyebrows raised in surprise. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah,” Edmund replied, staring at his drink. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s been on my mind constantly. I just... I feel like I need to do something that matters, something bigger than just getting a job and settling down.”

Trevor was quiet for a moment, then nodded slowly. “I get it. And you’re not alone in that, man. I’ve been thinking about it too.”

Edmund looked up, surprised. “You have?”

“Yeah, but not as intensely,” Trevor admitted. “I’ve done some reading, watched a few videos. It’s been in the back of my mind, you know? I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t considered it.”

Edmund leaned back in his seat, processing what Trevor had just said. “I did not expect that. I thought I was going crazy for even thinking about it.”

“You’re not crazy,” Trevor assured him. “It’s a big decision, but it’s not unheard of. I think a lot of people feel the way you do—they want to make a difference, do something meaningful. It’s just... it’s a lot to consider.”

“Yeah,” Edmund agreed. “But it’s like there’s this pull, this feeling that I need to be there.”

"I get that," Trevor said, taking a sip of his beer. "But before you make any decisions, maybe we both need to take a step back and really think about it. We're not in this alone, and we've got people here who care about us."

Edmund nodded, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. It was comforting to know he wasn't the only one with these thoughts, and the tension between them began to ease. Trevor grinned, sensing the shift in mood.

"Remember that time at the base when you tried to hustle me in pool?" Trevor teased, raising his glass.

Edmund chuckled, the memory bringing a smile to his face. "Yeah, and you still owe me for that one."

They clinked their glasses, the serious tone of the conversation giving way to laughter. Soon, they found themselves reminiscing about their time on base—joking about the ridiculous drills, the pranks they pulled on each other, and the camaraderie that had kept them going through the toughest days.

As the night wore on, they moved over to the dartboard, challenging each other to a game. The

competitive banter flowed easily between them, and for a while, the weight of their earlier conversation faded into the background. They were just two friends having a good time, enjoying a rare moment of normalcy.

The sound of darts hitting the board mixed with their laughter, and Edmund felt more at ease, grateful for the chance to unwind.

As they lined up their shots at the dartboard, Edmund glanced over at Trevor, a hint of concern in his eyes. "How's the jaw holding up after Bulldog's little 'love tap?" he asked, half-joking but genuinely curious.

Trevor smirked, rubbing his jaw lightly. "It's holding up alright. Honestly, I probably deserved it. But you should've seen his face compared to mine."

Edmund chuckled, "Yeah, I bet he wasn't expecting you to get back up so quick. You gave as good as you got."

Trevor grinned. "Damn right. If I'm going down, I'ma takem down with me."

But as the night wore on, something happened that neither of them expected.

As they were finishing their beers, Trevor's gaze shifted over Edmund's shoulder, and his expression changed. "Hey, isn't that Jennifer?"

Edmund turned to look, his heart skipping a beat when he saw her. Jennifer was indeed there, but she wasn't alone. She was sitting in a booth with a man Edmund recognized. They were deep in conversation, leaning in close—too close for Edmund's comfort.

"Who's that with her?" Trevor asked, clearly puzzled.

"That's Thomas, her boss.." Edmund muttered, his unease quickly turning to anger.

As Edmund stormed over to Jennifer and Thomas, the air between them crackled with unresolved tension. His heart pounded, a mix of disbelief and anger burning through his veins. "Jen?" he called out, his voice sharp, cutting through the noise of the bar.

Jennifer's head snapped up, her eyes widening in shock. "Eli? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Edmund replied, his voice steady but edged with frustration. "What's going on, Jen?"

Before Jennifer could offer an explanation, Thomas leaned back in his seat, that smug smile still plastered on his face. "Relax, man. We're just talking about work," he said casually, his eyes flicking toward Jennifer briefly before locking back onto Edmund. And then, with a quick, deliberate wink—a wink that Jennifer didn't see—he sent a message that was crystal clear.

The wink was gasolinerown on the fire, igniting everything Edmund had been trying to suppress. His world slowed for a split second, every doubt, every suspicion crashing into him all at once. Without thinking, he lunged forward, grabbing Thomas by the collar and yanking him up from his seat. The fury in Edmund's voice was unmistakable as he growled, "You think you can just play games like that?"

Jennifer jumped up, her face flushed with anger. "Eli, let him go! You just stormed out of the apartment. What did you expect?"

Edmund's grip tightened, his knuckles turning white against Thomas's shirt. He glanced at Jennifer, his voice low, controlled, but menacing. "What did I Expect?" So you just run to some guy's arms the second I'm gone? Is that your answer?"

Thomas, his composure faltering for the first time, tried to keep his voice steady. "Come on, man. You're overreacting."

Trevor, who had been watching from the sidelines, sensed how quickly things were unraveling. He stepped up, grabbing Edmund by the arm, his voice calm but firm. "Eli, let it go. It's not worth it. Let's just get outta here, man."

For a moment, Edmund stood frozen, his body trembling with rage. His mind whirled with thoughts of what could have been, the promises they'd made, the future they had talked about. But all of it felt like a lie now, crumbling beneath the weight of this moment.

His gaze softened just enough as he looked at Jennifer one last time, his voice hollow but resolute. "We're done.. Jen..."

Jennifer's eyes widened, clearly caught off guard. She stared at Edmund, her expression frozen in surprise, unable to mask it in time. For a moment, she said nothing, the weight of his words sinking in.

Edmund's jaw tightened, but he had no interest in being pulled into any argument. The truth was, there was nothing left to say. He held her

gaze for a brief moment longer, watching as she struggled to find a response.

Then, without another word, he turned and walked out of the bar.

Jennifer's voice trailed behind him, cold and manipulative. "Where are you going to stay, Eli? You live in my Apartment!"

He didn't stop. He didn't look back. The door swung shut behind him with a soft thud, but it felt like the final nail in the coffin of their relationship. Outside, the cool night air hit him, but it did nothing to clear the storm raging inside.

Trevor rushed out after him, catching up as Edmund strode purposefully down the street. "Eli, wait up!"

Edmund slowed, his steps heavy but determined. The anger still simmered under the surface, but there was also a strange clarity that had settled in the wake of the breakup. He didn't need to yell, didn't need to prove a point. This was over. He was done with everything that had tied him down.

Trevor fell into step beside him, glancing over with concern. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but you can crash at my place until you figure things out alright?”

Edmund took a deep breath, his chest tightening as the weight of the evening began to settle on him. He nodded slowly, grateful in a way that he couldn’t put into words. “Thanks, man. I Appreciate it...”

Trevor gave him a reassuring nod. “Come on, let’s get your stuff from the apartment. You’re not staying there tonight.”

They walked in silence toward the apartment, the reality of what Edmund had just done starting to sink in. It wasn’t just the breakup. It wasn’t just Jennifer. It was the fact that everything he had thought he was working toward, the stability, the future he was building—it had all just collapsed... It felt stupid, Ridiculous... Meaningless... But as the pieces fell, a strange sense of freedom began to creep in...

They reached the apartment, and Edmund paused at the door. The silence felt oppressive now, but he knew this was the right choice. He opened the door, not caring if Jennifer was there or not. He was past explanations. He grabbed his

bag from the bedroom, stuffing in a few clothes and essentials without a second thought.

Trevor stood by the door, watching quietly, not wanting to interrupt. Edmund slung the bag over his shoulder, giving the apartment one last look. It wasn't home anymore. Maybe it never really had been.

Without a word, he stepped out of the apartment for the last time, Trevor following close behind.

As they left, the weight of the relationship, the future he thought he wanted, drifted away. The thought of Ukraine tugged at him again, stronger this time. It wasn't just an idea anymore. It was a way out. A way forward.

As they walked down the quiet street, Trevor broke the silence. "So, what's the plan now?"

Edmund didn't answer right away, but as the cool breeze brushed against his skin, a sense of purpose finally began to settle in. "I think I know..." he said quietly, his eyes staring straight ahead.

Trevor looked at Edmund, sensing what he meant. He didn't push. He didn't need to. They kept walking, the streetlights casting long

shadows behind them as they moved forward,
into whatever came next.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAWN OF WAR

The drive from the bar to Trevor's apartment was thick with silence. Edmund hadn't said much, just stared out the window while driving, jaw tight. When they got inside, Trevor threw his keys on the counter and watched as Edmund collapsed onto the couch, staring blankly at the ceiling.

The breakup had hit hard. It wasn't just Jennifer—it was everything. It was the sense of drifting, of being stuck in a life that wasn't his. The thought of doing something bigger had been gnawing at him for weeks, but after tonight, it felt like the only option.

Edmund grabbed his phone and started searching. He typed in “International Legion Ukraine enlistment,” and scrolled through article after article. His eyes landed on the official site. There it was—requirements, an address for training barracks an hour from Lviv airport: **Yavoriv Military Base**. This wasn’t just an idea anymore. This was real. He found a flight. 9 a.m. tomorrow. Without a second thought, he booked it. Shutting his laptop, Edmund looked over at Trevor, who had been silently observing him from across the room. “I’m leaving tomorrow. Booked my flight for 9 a.m. Going to Ukraine. They’ll train me in Yavoriv.”

Trevor’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Wait, what? Ukraine? You’re serious?” He stepped forward, his voice rising with concern. “Eli, come on. You can’t be serious. This is insane! You just broke up with Jen, and now you’re running off to a war zone?” Edmund shrugged, standing up to grab his duffel bag. “What’s keeping me here, Trev? Civie life? It’s a joke. Sitting around, looking for jobs that don’t mean anything, working for people who don’t care? Dating girls that don’t care? It’s a waste of time.” Trevor stepped in front of him, hands up in frustration.

“What the hell, man? You think that’s better than life here? What happens when you get there and you’re stuck in something way worse? This isn’t just about you being pissed off about Jen, Eli!”

Edmund's face darkened. "This isn't just about her. It's about all of it. This whole civilian life—it's suffocating. I don't fit here, Trev. There's nothing for me anymore."

"You're not thinking clearly. Look, just stay, talk it through, and we'll figure something out." Trevor said, "Don't do this out of anger, man." But Edmund had already made up his mind. "I'm done talking about it, Trev. I'm leaving tomorrow. You don't have to understand."

That night, as Edmund crashed on the couch, Trevor picked up his phone. He scrolled through his contacts until he found the number for Edmund's parents.

He hesitated, then dialed. "Mrs. Wilson, I'm sorry for calling this late, but it's Eli," Trevor whispered, trying not to wake Edmund. "he's leaving for Ukraine tomorrow. He booked a flight. He's not thinking clearly. You need to stop him." The silence on the other end of the line was palpable before Mrs. Wilson finally responded, her voice trembling. "Trevor... what do you mean he's leaving? This is insane." "I know," Trevor replied, his voice filled with desperation. "I've tried talking him out of it, but he won't listen to me. I thought... maybe you or Mr. Wilson can talk to him before it's too late."

Within minutes, the wheels were set in motion. Trevor's call to Mrs. Wilson had sent a shockwave through Edmund's family. His father, a man who never backed down from a fight, was already in his truck, heading toward Trevor's apartment.

The next morning, Edmund was already packing when a heavy knock came at the door. Trevor, who had been dreading this moment, opened it to find Mr. Wilson standing there, his face set with grim determination. Without a word, he pushed past Trevor, heading straight for his son.

Eli paused, casting a sharp, incredulous look at Trevor.

"What the hell are you doing, Eli?" his father growled, the controlled anger in his voice unmistakable. But Eli didn't bother looking up, focusing instead on shoving clothes into his bag. "I'm leaving," he said flatly. "I've got a flight at nine. Going to Ukraine."

"Going to Ukraine?" Mr. Wilson barked, his voice rising. "You've lost your damn mind, boy. You think running off to fight someone else's war is going to fix whatever's broken in you?" Edmund zipped up his bag and finally turned to face his father.

"You don't get it. There's nothing here for me anymore. I'm done sitting around, pretending like any of this matters." His father stepped forward, his face inches from Edmund's, his voice sharp. "You think that's the answer? Going off to some foreign country, getting yourself killed? Is that what you want? To throw your life away because you're pissed off at the world?"

Edmund's hands clenched into fists, his body tense with anger. "At least over there, it means something! What am I supposed to do here? Sit in some dead-end job, chasing a life I don't even want?" Mr. Wilson's face reddened with fury. "You think my life didn't matter? I worked my ass off to provide for you, to give you opportunities. And this is how you repay me? By walking away?"

Edmund's temper flared, the words flying out before he could stop them. "You think I want your life? Sitting around, waiting for retirement, living a life that doesn't mean a damn thing?" His father's expression shifted from anger to hurt, but it was masked by pride. "You think you're better than that? You think you're too good to live the life I gave you? At least I stayed and took care of my family. You're running away, Eli. You're a coward..."

That word cut deep, but instead of backing down, Edmund stood his ground, his eyes

blazing. "Maybe I am running away. But I'm not going to waste my life pretending that sitting behind a desk is what I'm meant for." Mr. Wilson shook his head, his voice thick with emotion. "You're going to get yourself killed, and for what? You don't even know what you're fighting for over there."

"I know exactly what I'm fighting for," Edmund said, his voice cold. His father's face hardened, the tension between them boiling over into silence. Trevor stood helpless by the door, watching as the argument reached its peak. Without another word, Edmund grabbed his bag and pushed past his father, storming out of the apartment. The door slammed shut behind him, the finality of the moment hanging in the air like a dark cloud.

Trevor hesitated for a split second as the echo of the slamming door reverberated through the room, then quickly yanked it open, rushing out to follow Eli

Trevor rushed after Edmund, catching up as he threw his bag into the backseat of his car. "Eli, wait!" Trevor called, breathless. "Look, man, I get it. I do. But this is crazy. You don't have to do this." Edmund paused, his hand resting on the car door. He looked at Trevor, his face still

tight with anger but softening just slightly at the concern in his friend's voice.

Trevor sighed, knowing he couldn't convince him. Trevor shook his head, stepping aside, his face filled with disappointment. "Fine. But at least let me drive you to the airport."

Edmund gave a tight nod, then wordlessly pulled his duffel bag from the backseat of his car, slinging it over his shoulder before making his way to Trevor's car. The quiet resolve in his movements spoke louder than any words.

Eli gave one last glance at his car before turning to him. "I'm leaving my car here," he muttered, nodding toward it. "keep it clean, will ya?" His voice was calm, but there was a heaviness underneath it, a finality in the way he spoke, and gave Trevor his keys.

the weight of the argument still hanging between them like a fog. Trevor unlocked the doors with a click, and both of them slid into their seats without a word. The leather creaked under their weight as Trevor gripped the steering wheel, his eyes fixed straight ahead. Eli stared ahead, his jaw clenched, his mind trying to concentrate on what is ahead. The engine roared to life with a turn of the key, but it did little to break the tension that filled the small space.

Trevor gripped the steering wheel tightly, his eyes flickering between the road ahead and the rearview mirror. As he slowly drove away from the house, he caught one last glimpse of Edmund's father, crumpled over a stone slab in the front yard, shoulders shaking as he cried. The man who had always seemed so strong and unshakable was now broken, his pain laid bare in the open air. Trevor's chest tightened at the sight, guilt and helplessness knotting in his stomach. He didn't know if Edmund's decision was right, but seeing his father like that, Trevor felt the weight of it all in a way he hadn't before. He pressed the gas pedal, the image of the grieving man fading behind him, but the heaviness stayed.

The car ride to the airport was thick with tension. Trevor's knuckles were white against the steering wheel, and Edmund sat in silence, staring out the window as the city passed by. He couldn't shake the unease settling in his chest, but he wasn't about to turn back now. There was nothing left for him here.

After several minutes of silence, Trevor glanced over, his voice more careful now. "Eli, your mom called this morning."

Edmund's grip on his duffel bag tightened. "I'm not talking to her."

Trevor pulled into a parking lot just shy of the airport and killed the engine, turning to face Edmund. "You need to talk to her, man. You can't just leave without saying anything."

Edmund clenched his jaw, his emotions warring inside him. "She'll just try to stop me, Trev. She'll convince me to stay, and I... I can't stay."

Trevor grabbed Edmund's phone from the dashboard and handed it to him. "You owe her that much. At least pick up the call."

Edmund hesitated, staring at the phone in Trevor's hand before finally taking it. His thumb hovered over the screen before he pressed to dial back his mom's missed call.

It rang twice before she picked up. "Eli?" His mother's voice was shaky, a mix of relief and anxiety. "Eli.. are you okay?"

He closed his eyes, the weight of the conversation pressing down on him. "Yeah, Mom. I'm fine."

There was a pause on the other end, and when she spoke again, her voice was quieter, full of worry. "Trevor told me... about Ukraine. Eli, please. Don't do this. You don't have to go."

Edmund swallowed hard, his voice strained. "Mom, I can't stay here. I've been trying, but it's not working. This place, this life... it's not for me."

His mother's voice cracked, and he could hear the tears she was trying to hold back. "You don't have to leave us. You don't have to leave everything behind. You're throwing your life away, and for what?"

"I'm not throwing it away," Edmund replied, his voice hardening. "I just... I can't keep pretending, Mom. I need to do something real, something that makes sense."

"Please, Eli," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Please, don't go. Come home. We can figure this out together. Just come home."

Edmund felt his throat tighten, his chest heavy with the pull of her words. For a moment, he considered it—turning around, going back to the life he had tried to build. But the thought of staying felt suffocating. "I can't, Mom. I love you, but I gotta do this."

Silence filled the line before his mother spoke again, her voice shaky but firm. "Eli, you don't

have to prove anything. Whatever you're looking for... it doesn't have to be there."

He closed his eyes, gripping the phone tightly. "Mom, I wish it were that easy. But I need to see this through."

A pause, then her voice broke, pleading one last time, crying. "Promise me, Eli. Promise me you'll come back."

"I will," he whispered, the weight of the conversation pressing down on him as he hung up, her words lingering like an ache in his chest.

The glow of passing streetlights flickered across their faces, casting fleeting shadows as they drove down the empty highway. Neither of them said a word, each lost in their own thoughts. The hum of the engine and the soft whoosh of the tires on the road were the only sounds that filled the space between them.

Edmund leaned his head against the window, his breath fogging the glass. His mother's words still echoed in his mind, but he pushed them aside, focusing on the road ahead, trying to ignore the knot tightening in his chest. He didn't want to think about what he was leaving behind or who he was hurting. All that mattered

now was what was ahead—what he believed he needed to do.

They arrived at the airport with minutes to spare. Trevor pulled up to the curb, and the reality of the moment settled in. Edmund grabbed his bag from the back seat, and they stood in silence for a moment, neither quite knowing what to say.

"You sure about this?" Trevor finally asked, his voice quiet, almost resigned.

Edmund nodded, the decision feeling more final now than ever. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Trevor reached out, clasping Edmund's hand in a firm grip, his eyes filled with concern. "Take care of yourself, man. Don't do anything stupid."

Edmund gave him a small, grateful smile. "I'll be alright."

With a final nod, Edmund turned and walked into the terminal, his heart heavy but his mind resolute. He pulled his bags from the back seat, hoisting them over his shoulder as he moved through the bustling crowd. He didn't look back. The plane was waiting, and so was whatever came next.

For better or worse, his life was about to change forever.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Edmund's boots hit the tarmac, the dull thud swallowed by the constant hum of airport activity at Lviv International. It had been a long flight, but the unease bubbling inside him kept him from feeling the exhaustion. The air was thick with tension—almost as if the city itself was holding its breath. He stepped out of the terminal, taking in his surroundings, knowing that this was no ordinary journey. This was the edge of something much bigger.

He flagged down a dusty van at the curb, the paint peeling off its sides, and gave the driver the only Ukrainian military address he had from the International Legion website. The man didn't

say a word, just nodded, though his raised eyebrow said it all—another foreigner, looking for a fight that wasn't his. As the van rattled through the streets of Lviv, the scenery shifted. The quaint streets of the city center gave way to dilapidated buildings, Edmund felt the tension in his stomach coil tighter as they approached the outskirts.

After an hour, the van rumbled to a stop just outside the gates of Yavoriv Military Base. Edmund stepped out into the biting cold, the harsh Ukrainian winter immediately cutting through his jacket. The frost-laden air stung his lungs with every breath, a sharp contrast to the stale warmth of the van. He tightened his grip on his duffel bag, his fingers already stiff from the cold, and took in the scene before him.

A large sign read **YAVORIV MILITARY BASE** in both Ukrainian and English. Barbed wire curled ominously around the tall fences

It wasn't the sign that drew Edmund's attention—The entire base seemed to hum with activity. Soldiers marched in tight formation, their boots crunching against the icy ground. Others barked commands in rapid Ukrainian, their voices sharp and commanding. In the distance, vehicles revved and rumbled, kicking up plumes of exhaust that hung in the frigid air. For a

moment, Edmund simply stood there, overwhelmed by the sheer scale and intensity of the operation. He felt small, out of place, and yet undeniably drawn in.

“Stay?” the driver asked in broken English, nodding toward the gate.

Edmund hesitated, his mind swirling. The jet lag was finally catching up to him, his body aching from the sleepless flight and the hours spent hunched over in the cramped van. His muscles were sore, his head heavy, and his stomach churned—not just from fatigue but from the weight of what lay ahead. Taking a deep breath, he nodded. “Yeah. I stay.”

Edmund, trying to ignore the churning in his gut, approached the entrance.

The guard at the gate eyed him with suspicion as Edmund approached. “Passport,” the man barked in thickly accented English, holding out his hand.

Edmund fumbled with his bag, finally producing the document. His fingers trembled—not from fear, but from the cold that seemed to seep into his bones. The guard flipped through the

passport, glancing between Edmund and the photo.

“You’re here to join?” the guard asked, raising an eyebrow. “We get many like you. Volunteers. Some stay. Most... don’t.” He paused, handing the passport back before jerking his thumb toward the base. “Processing tent is that way. Follow the path.”

Edmund stepped past the gate, but it wasn’t immediate. The guard waved him aside, motioning for another soldier to approach with a clipboard. “You wait. Clearance check.”

He stood awkwardly as the clipboard-wielding soldier asked rapid-fire questions: “Why are you here? What experience do you have? Did you fill out forms online?” With every question, Edmund felt more like an outsider, someone who hadn’t fully understood what he was stepping into. After what felt like an eternity, the soldier finally waved him through with a curt nod. “Go now. Processing tent. Hurry.”

The dirt path to the processing tent was slick with patches of half-frozen mud, and Edmund’s boots slipped slightly as he walked. The cold wind whipped against his face, carrying with it the distant echo of shouted orders and the sharp cracks of rifle fire. The sounds sent a jolt

through him, a visceral reminder of why he was here. This wasn't training back home or a simulation. This was real. Every sound, every movement around him was part of a larger machine preparing for war.

Inside the tent, the contrast was jarring. The air was thick, humid from the body heat of dozens of recruits and officers crammed into the small space. The noise was deafening—overlapping voices in English, Ukrainian, French, and other languages, all blending into a chaotic din. The line of volunteers moved at a crawl, each one fumbling with forms or waiting for their name to be called.

Edmund shuffled forward, his legs heavy. The adrenaline that had carried him this far was fading, replaced by a bone-deep exhaustion. His mind buzzed with questions: Was he ready for this? Could he even keep up? The doubts clung to him like the cold outside, gnawing at his resolve.

By the time he reached the desk, the officer barely glanced at him. "Name?" the man asked without looking up.

"Edmund Wilson," he replied, his voice steadier than he felt.

The officer typed something into his laptop, his expression unreadable. “No paperwork? You didn’t fill anything online?”

Edmund shook his head. “I didn’t want to waste time.”

The officer smirked, leaning back in his chair. “No time to waste, huh? Well, you’re wasting mine now.” He slid a clipboard across the desk. “Fill this. Then medical. Then uniform. Then training. Welcome to the war, Mr. Wilson.”

Edmund grabbed the clipboard and moved to a corner, the noise around him fading into the background. His hands trembled slightly as he wrote, the weight of everything finally catching up to him. The jet lag, the cold, the endless questions—it all pressed down on him. He glanced around the room at the other recruits, some with the hardened expressions of seasoned soldiers, others just as lost as he felt. The reality of where he was—of what he had chosen—sank in deeper with every passing second.

When he finally handed the clipboard back, the officer waved him toward another tent. “Medical’s next. Try to keep up. Training doesn’t wait.”

Edmund adjusted his collar, giving a short nod.

As Edmund stepped back into the cold, the sharp wind biting at his face, he couldn't help but feel the first real sting of doubt. The pace was relentless, the environment unforgiving, and the stakes higher than he had ever imagined. But there was no turning back now.

The medical tent was a sharp contrast to the bustling processing area. Inside, it was sterile, cold, and efficient. A nurse, her expression unreadable, gestured for Edmund to sit on the examination table.

He was mentally preparing for a long, drawn-out procedure when the door suddenly opened and in walked a nurse who looked like she could bench-press a tank.

She towered over him, her broad shoulders filling the doorway.

"Shirt off," she said curtly, tapping her clipboard without so much as a glance at Edmund.

Edmund fumbled with his buttons, painfully aware of how clumsy his hands felt under her scrutinizing gaze. He dropped the shirt halfway,

gave her an awkward half-smile, and finally yanked it off with far less grace than he intended.

The nurse stepped forward, pressing the cold metal of her stethoscope against his chest without warning. Edmund tensed under the sudden chill, feeling like he'd just been jabbed with an icicle.

"Breathe," she said, her eyes flicking up at him for the first time, not as a request but an instruction. It was as though she was making sure he wasn't about to do something stupid, like pass out from nerves.

Edmund inhaled sharply, his breath coming in more like a gasp than a normal inhale. Her eyes narrowed just a fraction.

"Breathe normally," she said again, her voice flat but somehow carrying a hint of warning, as though failure to comply might result in consequences far worse than a botched medical exam.

Edmund forced himself to relax, letting out a slow, steady breath this time. The nurse continued without a word, moving through the examination with the kind of mechanical precision one would expect from someone who

had done this a thousand times before. She checked his reflexes by tapping his knee hard enough to make him wonder if she was secretly trying to knock it out of joint. The quick blood pressure check was followed by more silent scribbling on her clipboard, which seemed to be the only sound she made.

"You don't talk much, huh?" Edmund ventured, his voice light but carrying the edge of someone who was getting a bit desperate to break the silence.

She didn't answer. The sound of her scribbling continued for a moment longer before she finally paused, her pen hovering over the clipboard as she glanced up from the chart for the briefest of moments.

"Not paid for conversation," she said bluntly, her eyes meeting his for just a second before going back to her notes.

The examination dragged on, each step of the process feeling more and more like a series of impersonal tasks to be completed rather than a checkup on his actual health. She checked his ears, his eyes, and even made him stand up and sit down several times in what felt like an endless loop of pointless movement. She inspected him as though he were some kind of

machine in need of a tune-up, rather than a man preparing for war.

When she finally finished, Edmund felt like he'd been through a gauntlet, not because of the physical exam itself, but because of the silence and her unyielding presence. As she handed him his shirt back, she barely looked up.

"You're done," she said flatly, moving toward the next recruit without even waiting for his response.

Edmund quickly pulled his shirt back on. He felt a strange mix of relief and tension, like he'd just been through some bizarre, emotionless initiation.

As he left the tent, the sound of the bustling camp hit him full force—voices shouting, boots clattering, the hum of an army preparing for something far bigger than any one person. It was almost a relief to be out in the noise again, where everything made sense, and no one loomed over him with a clipboard.

"Wilson!" A stern voice called out, breaking him from his thoughts. A clipboard-wielding officer stood nearby, his expression unreadable. "Training Group Three. Follow the path." He

gestured toward a dirt road winding through the camp. "Report to the barracks for gear issue. Your group's already waiting."

Edmund nodded, shouldering his bag. The air buzzed with activity as he followed the path, his steps blending into the rhythm of the camp.

Edmund followed the dirt path toward the barracks, a slight tension creeping into his stride as he approached the entrance. The base's buzz of activity was almost deafening now—shouts of orders, the clang of equipment, and the low murmur of conversations in various languages. The base wasn't just alive; it was a constant hum of urgency, a place where time felt both fleeting and endless.

Inside, the barracks were a hive of movement. Recruits, some in mismatched civilian clothes, others already in uniform, hurried back and forth. The air was thick with tension and purpose, a shared sense of unease and anticipation hanging over everyone. Edmund stepped further in, trying to take it all in without drawing too much attention to himself. Rows of metal bunks lined the walls, a mix of neatly made beds and haphazard piles of gear suggesting the wide spectrum of experience among the recruits.

An officer at the entrance handed Edmund a thin, worn blanket and pointed toward an empty cot. "This is yours. Training begins tomorrow at 0600. Lights out at 2100 sharp. Get some rest while you can."

Edmund nodded, moving to his assigned spot. Dropping his duffel bag onto the cot, he scanned the room. A group of men spoke in low tones near the far wall, their accents a mix of French, German, and English. Nearby, a recruit struggled to lace up his boots while another sat on his bunk, staring blankly ahead. Most of the faces looked as new to this environment as Edmund felt—men adjusting, processing, and waiting.

Edmund sat down on his cot, taking a moment to stretch and rub his tired hands together. His thoughts were interrupted by a quiet voice from the next bunk over.

"First day, huh?"

Edmund turned to see a lean, sharp-featured man leaning back on his cot. His dark eyes glinted with a mix of curiosity and quiet humor as he studied Edmund. He wore a jacket with frayed cuffs, and his boots looked well-worn, as if he'd been breaking them in nonstop.

“Yeah,” Edmund replied. “Just got in. You?”

“Four days,” the man said, offering a faint smirk. “Enough time to know I haven’t made a terrible mistake. Yet.” He extended a hand. “Niko.”

“Edmund,” he said, shaking his hand. “Four days, huh? How’s it been so far?”

Before Niko could answer, another voice chimed in. “Long days, short nights, and muscles you didn’t know you had will start screaming at you,” said a wiry man who approached with a lopsided grin. His accent was harder to place, but his words were clear and deliberate. “I’m Igor. Three days in. They say it gets easier, but I haven’t seen proof.”

“Great,” Edmund muttered, though a faint smile tugged at his lips. “So I guess I shouldn’t expect a warm welcome.”

Niko chuckled softly. “Warm welcomes are for other wars. This one’s all frostbite and exhaustion.”

Edmund sat back, letting the conversation settle before his curiosity got the better of him. “What’s the situation out there?”

The faint smirk on Niko's face vanished. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "It's worse than anything you've seen on the news. The Russians keep pushing, and they've got the resources to keep this going forever. But it's not just their army—it's groups like Wagner."

Edmund frowned. "Wagner?"

Niko nodded, his jaw tightening. "Mercenaries. Officially, they're 'not part of the Russian military,' but they do the dirty work the Kremlin doesn't want its name on. Brutal stuff. If they're deployed, you can bet things are about to get ugly."

Igor added, his tone quieter, "They don't fight like soldiers. They're... efficient, but in all the worst ways. If they want to send a message, they'll burn down a village or worse. No rules. No accountability."

Niko nodded. "That's how they operate. They're not fighting a war—they're terrorizing people into submission. They hit where it hurts most and leave scars that don't heal. It's not just tactics; it's psychological warfare."

Edmund processed their words, the weight of what they were describing settling heavily on

him. He'd heard whispers of groups like Wagner before, but hearing it laid out so plainly made it feel far more real—and far more unsettling.

"They're the ones you don't want to face," Niko continued, his tone softer now. "But that's why we're here. To push back."

For a moment, the three of them sat in silence, the sounds of the barracks filling the space between their words. Men muttered in various languages, boots scuffed against the floor, and somewhere outside, the faint howl of the wind reminded them of the cold waiting beyond the walls.

Finally, Niko broke the silence with a chuckle, though there was no humor in it. "At least we've got you now," he said, nudging Edmund. "Another Yankee to save the day."

Edmund frowned slightly. "What's with the 'Yankee' thing?"

Igor smirked. "Your commanding officer, Kurpaso. He's American too. We call him the Yankee Commander."

Niko grinned. "He's tough. Doesn't talk much, but when he does, you listen. He's the kind of

guy who'll break you down just by looking at you."

"Great," Edmund muttered. "Sounds like tomorrow's going to be fun."

"Oh, it will be," Niko said, pushing off the bunk and stretching. "Just don't fall behind. Kurpaso doesn't tolerate weakness."

The barracks gradually quieted as the evening wore on. Recruits settled into their bunks, some muttering quietly in unfamiliar languages, others silently staring at the ceiling. The tension in the air was almost tangible, a shared understanding of what awaited them.

At precisely 2100, the lights dimmed, leaving the room bathed in the faint glow of a single bulb near the door. Edmund lay back on his cot, pulling the thin blanket over himself. The cold seeped through the walls, making sleep harder to come by. His thoughts drifted back to Igor and Niko's words, replaying their descriptions of the war and the captain. He stared at the ceiling, the sounds of the barracks fading around him. Eventually, exhaustion won out, and he slipped into a restless sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

WARM WELCOME

At 0600 sharp, a shrill whistle shattered the silence of the barracks. Edmund's eyes shot open, his heart pounding as the room erupted into chaos. Recruits scrambled out of their bunks, pulling on boots and jackets with hurried, frantic movements.

"Let's go! Move, move, move!" Kurpaso's booming voice echoed from the doorway, sharp and commanding. He stood with his arms crossed, his steely gaze sweeping over the recruits as they fumbled to get ready. "If you're not outside in two minutes, you're already dead. MOVE!"

Edmund swung his legs over the side of the cot, fumbling for his boots. Igor and Niko were already up, dressing with practiced speed.

Edmund followed them toward the door, his heart racing as Kurpaso's voice barked more orders. The cold morning air hit him like a slap as he stepped outside, the sky just beginning to lighten. The day had begun, and there was no turning back now.

Captain Grady Kurpaso stood in front of the group. His presence commanded attention, a man who clearly knew his way around a battlefield. His eyes scanned the recruits, assessing them without a word. When he finally spoke, his voice was steady but rough, cutting through the noise like a knife.

"Welcome to the International Legion," Kurpaso began. "I don't care where you're from, what language you speak at home. Here, in MY company, we speak one language—English.

He paced slowly, letting his words settle in. "The Legion was born out of necessity, out of the need to defend Ukraine against Russian aggression. This is not a regular army, but make no mistake—this is war. You fight here, you die here, or you survive by learning quickly. Some of you already have military experience. Good. Some of you

don't. That's fine too. But all of you will be treated the same."

Kurpaso's gaze swept over the room, landing briefly on Edmund. There was a flicker of recognition—an acknowledgment, subtle but real. They were both Americans, but this wasn't a place for old allegiances. Edmund gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. Kurpaso moved on without another word.

"Today," Kurpaso continued, "you'll be divided into smaller groups for training. You're here to learn basic military skills, and I'll be watching to see who's got the guts to make it. This is not just a fight for Ukraine; this is a fight for something bigger. You'll see that soon enough."

A murmur rippled through the recruits as they processed the gravity of the situation.

"Alright," Kurpaso barked, interrupting the moment. "We start with physical training. Follow orders. No excuses."

The recruits moved outside, herded by the bark of orders from other instructors. The training field stretched out before them—a vast, open space marked by obstacle courses, shooting ranges, and areas for tactical drills. The dirt

beneath their feet kicked up in clouds as they jogged to their designated starting points.

"Get moving!" shouted another instructor, his Ukrainian accent heavy but clear. "Ten laps around the field. You stop, you're out!"

The group began running. Edmund felt the burn in his legs almost immediately, the weight of travel, jet lag, and nerves catching up with him. Beside him, Niko kept pace effortlessly, his movements smooth and controlled. He seemed like someone who had done this a thousand times before.

"Keeping up, Yankee?" Niko asked, a teasing glint in his eye. His breathing was steady, annoyingly calm.

Edmund shot him a tired look, his breaths coming in sharp gasps. "Barely," he admitted. "You seem to be doing just fine."

Niko shrugged, his tone casual. "I've done my share of running. Back home, it was the only way to keep warm some days."

"Where's back home?" Edmund managed to ask between breaths, curiosity cutting through his exhaustion.

Niko hesitated for a moment, then grinned faintly. "Let's just say it's a cold place with a lot of long roads. This?" He gestured at the path ahead. "This is nothing."

Edmund chuckled despite the strain in his legs. "Glad it's nothing for you," he said, pushing himself to keep up. "For me, it feels like hell."

Niko smirked, his tone light but edged with challenge. "Good. Hell builds endurance."

Edmund groaned, but he couldn't help cracking a smile. Somehow, Niko's dry humor made the burning in his legs just a little easier to endure.

Edmund chuckled, though his legs screamed in protest.

As they rounded the second lap, it became clear who the weak links were. Rico, a recruit with a lean frame, was already gasping for air, his legs barely keeping up. Lucas, another recruit, glanced back, shaking his head. "Este hombre nos matará a todos." (*This guy is going to get us all killed in spanish*)"

Edmund tried to ignore the tension, focusing on his own pace, but it was hard not to notice Rico falling further behind with each passing lap. By

the time they finished, the group was dripping with sweat, some hunched over with their hands on their knees, desperately trying to catch their breath.

As they finished their laps, the group gathered near the weapons range. Rows of AK-47s and other rifles were lined up, gleaming in the midday sun.

"Line up!" an instructor shouted. "We start weapons training now."

Edmund grabbed an AK-47, the weight of it familiar yet foreign in his hands. The instructor moved down the line, correcting stances, adjusting grips. Edmund fired off his first shot, the recoil jolting through him as the bullet hits directly on target.

Next to him, Niko was a natural, hitting his target with precision. Lucas wasn't far behind, his shots scattered but generally on target. Rico, on the other hand, struggled to even hold the rifle steady.

"You're shaking like a leaf," Lucas muttered, watching Rico fumble with his gun. "How do you expect to survive, Hombre?"

Rico didn't respond, his face flushed with embarrassment.

The drills continued for hours—running, shooting, tactical exercises. By the time the sun began to set, the recruits were exhausted, their bodies pushed to the limit. But there was no time for rest.

"Tomorrow, we move on to close-quarters combat," Kurpaso said as the recruits gathered around him. "You'll learn how to clear rooms, engage enemies in urban environments, and work as a unit. This isn't just about shooting. It's about survival."

Edmund wiped the sweat from his brow, his muscles aching. The weight of the day hung heavy on him, but there was something else too—a sense of purpose. He glanced at Niko, who gave him a knowing look.

"This is just the beginning," Niko said quietly. "Tomorrow, we really see who's made for this."

As the group broke for the night, Edmund lay in his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. The barracks were quiet now, the earlier chaos replaced by the soft sounds of recruits shifting in their sleep.

As the barracks settled into a quiet rhythm, a low murmur of snores and the shuffling of bodies filled the room. Edmund lay on his bunk, staring at the dim lights above, too alert to sleep. The day's events still played over in his mind. That's when he heard a sound—a muffled grunt, followed by shuffling.

He turned his head to see Lucas, along with another recruit, Marquez looming over Rico's bed. Rico was barely awake when Lucas grabbed him by the collar and jerked him upright.

“Still think you belong here, eh?” Lucas sneered, his voice dripping with mockery. The other recruit shoved Rico back onto the bed, laughing under his breath. “You're in the wrong place.”

Rico stammered something, but it was lost in the low, cruel laughter of Lucas's companion.

Edmund swung his legs off his bunk and stood, moving quickly toward the group. “Back off,” he ordered, his voice cutting through the tension. He positioned himself between Rico and the bullies, locking eyes with Lucas.

Lucas scoffed, sizing him up. “Or what? You think you can take us?”

Before Edmund could respond, a voice cut through the room—deep and steady.

“You should listen to him...”

Niko stepped forward from the shadows, his muscular lean frame visible under the dim lights. His calm demeanor belied the threat in his eyes.

Lucas hesitated, his bravado faltering under Niko’s steady gaze. Marquez shifted uneasily, no longer interested in escalating things.

With a final glare at Niko, Lucas backed away, Marquez quickly following.

Niko watched them go before turning to Edmund. “cowards...” he said quietly, his voice carrying a note of reassurance.

Edmund nodded, grateful but saying nothing as Niko pat him on the shoulder and returned to his bunk. He turned back to Rico, who was still sitting up, eyes wide and breathing unsteady.

“Thanks...” Rico managed to say, his voice barely above a whisper.

Edmund crossed his arms, the tension in his posture returning. He didn't bother softening his tone. "Look, I'm not here to babysit you," he said bluntly. "You need to step up. Or decide if you even belong here."

Rico stared at him, the weight of Edmund's words settling in.

Without waiting for a response, Edmund turned and went back to his own bunk, leaving Lucas to reflect on the reality of what he'd signed up for. His legs were heavy with exhaustion, but the weight of his decision to step into this chaos was more pressing than the ache in his muscles.

The barracks had finally settled into a muted rhythm—muffled snores, the shuffling of restless bodies, and an underlying tension that simmered beneath the quiet. Sleep was a luxury here, and every recruit knew it. It was almost too silent now, as if the shadows of each man's doubts were hanging heavy in the stillness.

Edmund lay on his back, staring up at the dimly lit ceiling, his mind refusing to let him drift. Thoughts of home sneaked their way in—his father's face, worn yet proud; his mother, always worried but steadfast in her support...

CHAPTER SEVEN

UNDER THE WEIGHT

A sudden, piercing shout shattered the silence. “Up! Everyone up!” an instructor’s voice roared through the darkness of the barracks, jolting the recruits awake. Edmund’s eyes flew open, and he rubbed them groggily, a familiar ache settling in his bones. He hadn’t slept much, his mind whirling with the events of the previous day—the long flight, his first hours at the base, and the weight of his choice to come here.

As he pulled on his clothes, the barracks came alive with the shuffling and murmurs of other recruits preparing for the day. A heavy tension filled the room, a shared anticipation of the

unknown. Edmund glanced around, catching glimpses of others like Niko, who wore an unreadable but resolute expression as he laced up his boots, focused and detached from the nervous chatter around him. Some recruits moved quickly, all business, while others hesitated, adjusting their gear with nervous hands.

“Wilson! You’re with Group Three!” an officer barked from the doorway, clipboard in hand.

Edmund nodded, grabbing his jacket and moving to join his group outside. The morning chill hit him like a splash of cold water. An instructor handed each recruit an MRE and a water bottle, his voice carrying authority. “You’ve got 20 minutes to eat. Make it quick.”

Edmund and the others tore into their MREs, familiar with the routine, while Rico hesitated, examining the packet with quiet uncertainty.

Niko smirked as he stirred the unappealing meal. “First time with this stuff, huh? You’ll learn to get it down.”

Rico gave a faint nod, letting the conversation flow around him. Edmund turned his gaze to Niko, catching a hint of a difference in his

accent. "You're not local," Edmund said softly. "Where are you from Niko?"

"Belarus," Niko replied, his jaw tightening. "Better to do something now than wait for them to come knocking."

A dry chuckle passed through the group, cutting the edge of the tension. Lucas, leaning slightly forward, decided to chime in. "Spain," he said casually, his voice carrying a deliberate edge. "And I'm here for one thing—to kill Russians."

His grin was sharp, almost playful, but there was an unsettling conviction behind his words that made the moment hang in silence.

Edmund nodded, meeting their eyes, sharing in the mix of tension, humor, and anger they all carried in their own ways. They continued chewing in silence, the weight of unspoken thoughts hanging between them, until the instructor's voice sliced through the stillness.

"Alright, recruits! Time to work off that breakfast! Jog laps around the training course. Move it!"

The recruits groaned, pushing themselves up and beginning to jog, their footsteps forming a

steady rhythm against the dirt, carrying the weight of distant memories with each step.

Captain Kurpaso strode in, his steps purposeful, cutting through the crisp morning air with the kind of authority that silenced every recruit in the line. He surveyed the group, his voice clear and commanding.

“Today, we’re starting close-quarters combat training,” he announced. “This isn’t a game. Knowing how to fight up close can mean the difference between life and death.” He motioned to the open area scattered with training mats. “Each of you will practice holds, counters, and disarms. Don’t waste energy. Every move has a purpose.”

With that, he demonstrated the first drill—a swift wrist lock and weapon disarm that looked deceptively simple in his hands. “Grab the wrist, lock the arm, twist into the disarm,” he said, performing each step with seamless precision. “Partner up. Let’s see if any of you can pull this off.”

Edmund moved to face Niko, while Rico took his position across from Lucas. Niko’s expression was confident, even a little amused, as he gave Edmund a quick once-over.

“Ready?” Edmund asked, taking his stance.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, tovaritsch,” Niko replied, smirking.

At the call to begin, Niko lunged forward, his movements swift and precise. Edmund reacted, but he was a fraction too slow; in a flash, Niko had locked his arm, spinning him off balance and sending him stumbling onto the mat. Niko released him with a satisfied smirk.

Edmund took a steadying breath, frustration sparking in his eyes. “Again,” he said, his tone sharper, determination simmering.

Meanwhile, Rico and Lucas faced off, an uneasy silence stretching between them. Rico shifted, his eyes darting nervously, while Lucas’s gaze was hard, unyielding, his expression taunting, daring Rico to even try.

“Come on, what are you waiting for?” Lucas sneered

Gritting his teeth, Rico took a breath and moved in, reaching for Lucas’s wrist, determined to attempt the disarm. But as soon as he made contact, Lucas twisted free with a dismissive

chuckle, easily breaking Rico's weak hold and pushing him to the ground.

"Que Patetico Tio," Lucas muttered, loud enough for a few of the other recruits to hear. Go on, try again—if you're not too scared."

Rico swallowed hard, a faint flush coloring his cheeks, but he reset his stance and lunged for Lucas's wrist once more, putting a bit more force into it this time. He managed to get a grip, albeit clumsy, but Lucas simply scoffed and yanked his arm back, sending Rico off balance.

"Is that the best you have?" Lukas jeered

Fighting to ignore Lucas's taunts, Rico steadied himself and tried again, locking onto Lukas's wrist with a stronger grip. This time, Lucas had to exert some effort to shake him off. Raising an eyebrow, he gave Rico a half-smile that was more mocking than approving.

Nearby, Edmund faced off against Niko, studying his stance and rhythm with a determined focus. Taking a breath, Edmund lunged forward, aiming for Niko's wrist with practiced precision. His grip was firm as he executed Captain Kurpaso's disarm technique with surprising accuracy.

Niko's eyes widened, caught off guard by Edmund's swift move. He twisted free with a quick, fluid motion, but his expression had shifted from light amusement to genuine respect.

They resumed, both with renewed determination, each pushing the other harder with every hold and counter.

Captain Kurpaso watched them all, nodding approvingly, his expression softening slightly as he noted the sweat dripping from their faces. "Good work, recruits. Keep that intensity," he said, his tone as brisk as ever. "You've earned a break." He paused, then added, "Dismissed for lunch. Be back here in an hour. And stay sharp—next drill will be even tougher."

The recruits let out subtle sighs of relief and began filing out of the training area toward the cafeteria.

As the recruits filed into the cafeteria, the noise level rose with clinking trays and idle chatter. Rico shuffled to the back of the line, staring down at the mystery meal on his tray as if hoping it might spontaneously transform into something edible.

The air was thick with the mingled smells of reheated food and sweat, the latter lingering from the morning's brutal drills. Edmund sat at a corner table with Niko and a few others, rubbing his aching wrist absently as he stared at the unappetizing meal in front of him.

He poked at it with his fork, eyeing the grayish mass dubiously. It looked about as edible as the rubber soles on his boots.

"Just eat it," Niko muttered, not bothering to look up. His accent was thick, his words clipped in that way that made his Eastern European heritage more pronounced. He forked a piece of unidentifiable meat with grim resignation. "It won't get any better if you keep staring."

Edmund rolled his eyes but made no move to comply, still toying with the food as if it might magically turn into something else. "Easier said than done," he mumbled. "I'm not sure what this is supposed to be." They were still laughing when Rico, Lucas and his cronies slid into the seats around them. Lucas wore a smug smile as he glanced at the three recruits, his eyes lingering on Rico with a look of quiet challenge.

Without missing a beat, one of Lucas's friends, Marquez, leaned over and reached for the solitary

biscuit on Rico's tray. Rico's hand shot out, intercepting Marquez's reach.

"No jodas!" (*Fuck Off!*) he said, his voice steady, but with an edge that quieted the table for a moment.

Marquez's expression soured, his eyes narrowing as if considering pushing back. But Lucas laughed, breaking the tension.

"Déjalo, Tío," (*Let it go, man*) he said, watching Rico with a glint of amusement, his voice casual but probing. **"¿Puerto Rico, verdad? ¿Por qué alguien como tú está aquí?"** (*Puerto Rico, right? Why is someone like you here?*)

Rico stayed quiet, but Lucas didn't let up.

"Déjame adivinar... te cansaste de las playas. ¿O tal vez alguien te dijo, papi, que eras inútil allá?" (*Let me guess... you got tired of the beaches. Or maybe daddy told you that you were useless back there?*)

Marquez laughed loudly, but before he could add anything, Rico cut him off, his tone sharp.

"Cállate." (*Shut up.*)

Lucas leaned in closer, his grin widening.

“Tranquilo, Tío. No tienes que ponerte así. Solo quiero saber qué te mueve. ¿Por qué estás aquí?”
(*Relax, man. You don't have to be like that. I just want to know what drives you. Why are you here?*)

Rico met his gaze.

“Para hacer algo que otros no pueden.” (*To do something others can't.*)

Lucas raised an eyebrow.

“¿Y qué es eso?” (*And what's that?*)

Rico smirked,

“Lo mismo que tú, solo que sin hablar tanto.”
(*The same as you, just without talking so much.*)

Lucas's grin returned, but it was less mocking this time.

Niko remained calm, watching Lucas and his group closely but saying nothing. The tension crackled between them, thick as smoke, before

Lucas finally leaned back, gesturing for Marquez to do the same.

Niko's gaze drifted toward the far end of the room, where a few figures sat apart from the rest. "Listen," he said to Edmund, his tone light but a bit more deliberate now. "Don't be obvious, but... see that table in the corner?"

Edmund's curiosity flickered to life. He shifted his posture, glancing over his shoulder casually. As his eyes landed on the group, he spotted her immediately. Yulia Tolopa—Valkyrie.

The memory hit him with surprising clarity: a video he'd once watched on a friend's tablet, showing her pulling a wounded comrade to safety, calm and focused as bullets peppered the ground around her. Now, seeing her just a few tables away, she seemed more grounded, but there was still an unmistakable presence about her.

At her table, she leaned forward, speaking in low, controlled tones to her teammates. Each of them wore that same calm focus. They didn't look like the usual recruits—they had the air of people who'd seen things, the kind that come with silent understanding and shared history.

Niko's eyes hadn't left Edmund, watching the realization settle on his face. "Yeah, that's her," he said with a knowing chuckle. "But maybe don't make it so obvious, yes?" He smirked as Edmund continued to watch, even as he tried to turn back casually.

Just then, Valkyrie's gaze shifted, locking onto Edmund's with a sharp, assessing look that sent a jolt through him. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and for a tense second, it felt as though she could see straight through him. Edmund quickly looked away, feeling a surge of heat creep up his neck.

Niko noticed the flush on Edmund's face and grinned. "Oh, very smooth," he teased in his dry, Eastern European lilt. "You made it look like you weren't staring at all," he added with a chuckle. "Maybe she'll let it slide. Or maybe she's already planning to get us booted now. Fabulous...

Edmund cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. "What's someone like her doing here anyway?" he muttered, almost more to himself than to Niko.

Niko gave a small shrug, then Lukas pitched in, "Maybe she's here to 'inspire' us," he said, the word rolling off his tongue with playful sarcasm. He leaned in, lowering his voice as if Valkyrie

could hear them from across the room. “But I think you staring like a deer in headlights? Great first impression” Lukas quipped as he chuckled.

Edmund shook his head, letting out a sigh as Niko took a thoughtful bite of his food.

“People like her—they have their own rhythms, their own rules,” Niko continued. “We’re just the extras in their story.”

Edmund nodded, still feeling the weight of her presence just a few tables away. “If she’s here, there’s gotta be something bigger going on,” he murmured, more to himself. “Makes you wonder what they’re gearing up for.”

Niko chuckled, shaking his head. “Always plans, my friend. Always something. Just don’t get ideas,” he teased, raising a brow. “Eat up—you’ll need the energy if Valkyrie decides to ‘show us how it’s done.’”

The cafeteria erupted into chaos as Captain Kurpaso and his sergeants barged in, their presence commanding immediate attention. Kurpaso’s whistle split the air like a gunshot, silencing the room.

“Recruits! On your feet!” he roared. “Training field. Three minutes! Move!”

Recruits scrambled to comply, chairs screeching against the floor and trays clattering as they rushed to gather their gear. Some seasoned soldiers smirked, unbothered, watching the younger men and women scramble in disarray. Edmund shoved his half-eaten meal aside and nudged Niko, who had already risen with a knowing smirk.

“Wonder what fresh hell this is,” Edmund muttered, pulling on his jacket.

“Does it matter?” Niko replied dryly, adjusting his gloves. “If Kurpaso’s in charge, it’s not going to be a walk in the park.”

By the time they reached the field, the sight of seven massive logs laid out across the dirt answered any lingering questions. Each log, thick and gnarled, was meant to be carried by a seven-man team through an unforgiving obstacle course. Muddy trenches, beams, walls, and uneven terrain stretched far into the distance, promising a grueling challenge.

Kurpaso stepped forward, hands behind his back, surveying the recruits with a stern glare.

“This exercise is about strength, coordination, and teamwork. You’ll carry these logs through the course as a unit. Seven recruits per team. The first team to finish gets the evening off. The last team?” His voice sharpened like the crack of a whip. “You’ll run it again until I feel like it.”

Sergeant Grady began calling out team assignments, clipboard in hand. “Group One: Wilson, Niko, Ivanov, Zaytsev, Ortega, Huang, and Moretti.”

Edmund felt the weight of the moment settle on him as his name was called with Niko’s. The two exchanged a look, both silently agreeing this was their chance to shine.

“Group Two: Marquez, Lucas, Igor, Petrov, Singh, Aleks, and Rico.”

Rico tensed slightly but set his jaw, stepping into formation. His teammates, particularly Lucas, cast critical glances his way.

“Try not to drop it, Marquez,” Lucas said, his Spanish accent dripping with sarcasm as he adjusted his gloves. “Maybe this time, you’ll keep up, Rico.”

Rico gave no reply, his focus shifting to the log. His grip tightened as his expression steeled.

The remaining teams were called, and soon the recruits were hoisting the logs onto their shoulders, their muscles straining under the immense weight.

Kurpaso's whistle shrieked. "Go!"

The teams surged forward. Edmund immediately synced with Niko, who set the pace for their group. "Keep it steady!" Niko called, his voice calm but commanding. "Short steps! Everyone, match the rhythm!"

Their coordination was seamless. Edmund adjusted his position quickly to align with Niko's lead, their movements in sync as they tackled the first trench. "On three, tilt forward," Niko ordered. "One, two—three!" The log slid smoothly over the edge, and they pressed on.

Meanwhile, Lucas's group was already faltering. The weight of the log dragged them unevenly as Lucas shouted commands in his thick accent, his frustration mounting. "Lift it higher! Rico! What are you doing? You're slowing us down!"

"I'm holding my side!" Rico shot back, his voice strained but determined. "You keep pulling us off balance!"

The log wobbled dangerously before slamming into the mud. Rico braced himself quickly, helping Petrov reset the log onto their shoulders as Lucas fumed.

"You dropped it, you idiot!" Lucas growled, his anger spilling over.

"No, I didn't," Rico retorted, his voice steady despite the tension. "We're all slipping because you're rushing us!"

"Move! Move!" Kurpaso's voice cut through the commotion. "Group Two, back to the trench and start again!"

As Group Two reset, Group One surged ahead, tackling the first wall with precision. Edmund took the lead this time, calling out instructions. "Tilt it left. Niko, call the count. On my mark, lift it over!"

Niko grinned slightly, appreciating Edmund's initiative. "Lift on three," he called to the group. "One, two—three!" The log cleared the trench in

perfect rhythm, the team advancing with renewed momentum.

Behind them, Lucas's group hit another snag at the narrow beam crossing. The uneven terrain made the log wobble again, and Rico scrambled to stabilize it, shouting, "Hold steady! Lift with me on three!"

But Lucas ignored him, shouting conflicting orders. "No! Push forward faster! We're falling behind!"

The log tipped to the side, slipping from Igor's grip and slamming into the mud once more. "Damn it, Lucas!" Rico snapped, his patience finally breaking. "We need to work together, not shout over each other!"

Lucas spun around, his face twisted in frustration. **"¿Crees que puedes decirme qué hacer, Tío?"** (You think you can tell me what to do?) he barked, his voice sharp with anger. **"¡Tú eres el que nos está retrasando!"** ("You're the one holding us back!")

Rico stepped closer, his eyes blazing. "I'm the one holding this thing up while you're too busy barking stupid orders!"

Without warning, Lucas shoved Rico backward, the force making him stumble into the mud. The rest of the team froze, the tension crackling like a live wire.

Kurpaso approached, his expression stony. "Group Two, you're a disaster. Start the beam again!"

By now, Edmund and Niko's group had reached the final stretch, their teamwork flawless. Every recruit pulled their weight, their pace accelerating as they neared the finish line. "Almost there!" Edmund shouted, the adrenaline driving them forward. "Don't slow down now!"

The moment their log crossed the finish line, Kurpaso blew his whistle. "Group One! Twelve minutes, forty-five seconds. Outstanding."

The group erupted into cheers, dropping the log with relief as Kurpaso nodded approvingly. "You've earned the evening off."

After a while, Group Two staggered across the line, battered and exhausted. Kurpaso's glare was cold. "Twenty-three minutes. Start again."

Rico's face was streaked with mud, but his determination was unbroken. He turned to

Lucas, his voice low but firm. “we need to work together, yeah?”

Lukas sneered but said nothing, his authority crumbling under the weight of their repeated failures.

Edmund watched from the sidelines, nodding slightly as he saw the resolve in Rico’s eyes. Progress wasn’t always smooth, but it was there.

“Looks like Marquez is figuring it out,” Niko murmured, smirking as he clapped Edmund on the back. “Not bad, eh?”

“Not bad at all,” Edmund replied, already looking ahead to the next challenge...

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND BROTHERHOOD

The days blurred into a relentless cycle of grueling drills and exhausted nights, punctuated by the shouts of Captain Kurpaso and the occasional crack of humor from the recruits. The training regimen was designed to break them down and rebuild them into soldiers capable of facing anything, and time passed through a mix of monotony, progress, and fleeting moments of camaraderie.

The first week tested the recruits' limits. Every morning began the same way, Kurpaso's voice

echoing through the barracks like a gunshot. “Up! You’ve got sixty seconds to be dressed and ready outside!”

Bleary-eyed and sore, Edmund and the others stumbled out of their bunks and into the cold morning air. The runs were brutal, stretching miles around the muddy perimeter of the camp. Niko, ever composed, maintained a steady pace, occasionally glancing back at Edmund with an amused smirk. “Try to keep up”

By midweek, exhaustion began to take its toll. During close-quarters combat, Edmund struggled to keep pace with Niko. Each sparring session ended with him on the mat, gasping for breath. “You need to stop thinking and start moving, Wilson!” Kurpaso barked, his eyes drilling into Edmund. “This isn’t a chess match.”

Rico, meanwhile, bore the brunt of Lucas’s taunts. Every time Rico hesitated, Lucas pounced, throwing him to the mat with ease. “Nunca vas a sobrevivir así tan blando tío! (*“You’ll never make it out there if you’re this soft”*)” Lucas sneered. The words stung, but Rico got back up every time, his determination burning brighter with each fall.

At night, the recruits collapsed onto their bunks, their bodies aching and their minds racing. “Esto

es peor que el cartel tío," (*"this is worse than the cartel"*). Marquez muttered, pulling his blanket over his head. ¿Recuérdame por qué estamos aquí, tío?" (*"Remind me why we're here again?"*)

"Porque aquí es donde cuenta," (*"Because this is where it counts"*) Lucas replied quietly, staring at the ceiling.

By the second week, a rhythm began to form. The recruits adapted to the runs, their breathing more controlled, their strides more coordinated. Edmund pushed himself harder, keeping pace with Niko and even managing to pass him on occasion.

Close-quarters combat sessions grew more intense. One afternoon, Edmund finally managed to disarm Niko, executing the move with precision. Niko raised an eyebrow, brushing himself off. "Looks like you're learning," he admitted.

For Rico, the breakthrough came during a grappling drill. After weeks of enduring Lucas's dominance, Rico countered a hold and pinned Lukas to the mat. The room fell silent as Lukas stared up at him, stunned. Slowly, a grin spread across Lukas's face. "About time, Puerto Rico," he said, shoving Rico off and standing. It wasn't exactly friendship, but it was a start.

As the days passed, even Marquez began to emerge as a dependable teammate. During weapons training, he consistently hit his targets, earning a rare nod of approval from Kurpaso. "At least one of you knows how to aim," the captain remarked, his voice gruff but satisfied.

The recruits found solace in the small victories, sharing quiet moments of camaraderie over their evening meals. "Two weeks down," Niko said one night, his voice low but steady. "Only...what? Eternity to go?"

"Feels like it," Rico muttered, rubbing his sore shoulder. "But at least I didn't get slammed today."

"Progreso," Lucas quipped, flashing a rare grin. "No dejes que se te suba a la cabeza (don't let it go to your head)."

The third week brought heavier challenges. The obstacle course became a daily fixture, its muddy trenches and towering walls designed to break the recruits. Edmund, Niko, Lukas, Rico, and Marquez found themselves in the same group, their teamwork slowly solidifying.

"On three, lift!" Marquez called during a log-carrying drill. The group heaved the massive log

onto their shoulders, moving in perfect sync. Edmund glanced at Rico, who matched the rhythm without faltering. "You're getting there," Edmund said, his tone encouraging.

Weapons training became more demanding, with live-fire exercises added to the mix. Edmund and Marquez partnered up, clearing rooms with increasing efficiency. "Clear!" Marquez shouted, his calm demeanor balancing Edmund's intensity.

The nights were quieter now, the recruits too exhausted to speak much. "Three weeks," Rico said one evening, his voice muffled by his pillow. "Three weeks, and I haven't been kicked out yet."

"You're still here because you've got guts," Niko replied. "Don't forget that."

"Or maybe is because Kurpaso hasn't notice him yet," Lukas added with a smirk, his Spanish accent thick on the words..

The jab was met with a pillow to the face, and for a moment, laughter filled the barracks.

By the fourth week, the recruits were no longer the fumbling group of individuals they had been. Their movements were sharper, their reactions

faster. Edmund consistently held his own against Niko during sparring, while Rico and Lukas, once bitter rivals, worked together seamlessly during team exercises.

Kurpaso's approval remained elusive, but his sharp critiques softened into measured encouragement. "Good work today," he said one afternoon, his voice carrying a rare warmth.

As the recruits lay in their bunks that night, the weight of their progress hung in the air. The soft hum of distant generators filled the silence, broken only by the occasional creak of the wooden frames beneath them.

"One month down," Niko said, his voice cutting through the darkness. "Feels like a lifetime."

"But we're still standing," Edmund replied. "That's what matters."

"For now," Lukas said, his Spanish accent lilting through the room. "But let's see who's still standing when the bullets start flying. I've got my bets."

"Let me guess," Edmund said with a smirk in his voice. "You think you're the brave one?"

"Of course," Lukas replied smoothly. "Someone has to set an example. You, on the other hand..." He trailed off, letting the jab linger.

Edmund laughed quietly. "You think I'd run?"

"Not run," Lukas said, grinning. "You'll probably freeze. Just standing there, thinking, analyzing. By the time you decide to move, it's over."

"Oh, and you'd be so quick?" Edmund shot back. "I saw you flinch when Kurpaso dropped his clipboard yesterday. Thought you were about to hit the floor."

"That was reflex," Lukas said defensively. "A good soldier is always alert."

"A good soldier doesn't jump at shadows," Edmund countered, his grin audible. "But hey, if you need someone to hold your hand out there, I'll be right behind you."

"Right behind me because you're too scared to take the lead," Lukas fired back, earning a quiet laugh from Niko.

Rico, lying silently in his bunk, chuckled softly but said nothing. Edmund caught the sound and turned his way. "What about you, Rico? You

staying quiet because you know you'll be the first one hiding?"

Rico shook his head but didn't reply. Lukas filled the gap. "Rico? Nah. He'll probably be too busy looking cool, trying to keep his hair perfect for the war photographers."

Edmund laughed. "Yeah, he'll get his picture in the papers, holding a rifle he hasn't even fired yet."

Rico finally spoke, his voice low but steady. "Better that than freezing up like you two will."

The room erupted into laughter, even Edmund and Lukas joining in.

"All right, fair enough," Edmund said, grinning. "But when it comes down to it, let's just agree none of us is getting out of this looking heroic."

"Speak for yourself," Lukas said. "I plan to look great, even under fire."

"You'd better practice not ducking every time someone slams a door," Edmund quipped, earning another round of quiet chuckles.

The banter carried on, their teasing keeping the looming reality of war at bay. In the dark, with nothing but each other, the recruits found a fleeting moment of ease.

CHAPTER NINE

NEW BLOOD

The monotony of training was broken one crisp morning with the arrival of a new group of recruits. The ten newcomers stood in a line near the barracks, their uniforms pristine and their faces fresh with a mix of nerves and determination.

Kurpaso addressed the recruits, his voice as sharp as ever. “These are your new brothers and sisters. They’ve got catching up to do, so don’t go easy on them.”

From the sidelines, Edmund’s group watched with curiosity. Among the new faces, a familiar figure caught Edmund’s eye. His breath hitched as he recognized Trevor, his old friend, grinning like he’d just won the lottery.

“Eli!” Trevor called, breaking formation to jog over. “You didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun, did you?”

Edmund stared at him, equal parts relief and disbelief washing over him. “Trevor? What the hell are you doing here?”

Before Trevor could respond, Kurpaso’s voice cut through the moment like a knife. “Davison! Back in line. You can reunite with Wilson after you’ve survived your first day.”

Trevor winked at Edmund before jogging back to his group. “See you out there, bud.”

As the sun rose over the training camp, The morning had been a grueling test of endurance, the kind designed to strip away any lingering comfort and replace it with raw determination. By the time the clock crept toward noon, the recruits had already been through five hours of relentless drills—push-ups, sit-ups, a brutal two-mile run, and countless shouted corrections from instructors. The cold February air had turned the sweat on their skin into a biting chill, and every muscle felt like it had been wrung dry.

As they were finally dismissed, the group trudged toward the mess hall, boots heavy

against the frostbitten ground. The brief walk offered a welcome pause, though the sting of exhaustion lingered. Edmund wiped a bead of sweat from his temple, exchanging a glance with Niko, who nodded silently, his face calm but flushed from exertion. The mess hall came into view, a steel structure offering the promise of food and a moment to sit.

Inside, the room buzzed with muted energy—the clatter of trays, the low hum of conversation, and the occasional bark of laughter. Soldiers shuffled through the line, some barely lifting their boots as they loaded their plates with the limited offerings. Others were already seated, hunched over their meals, fatigue written across their faces. Edmund, Niko, Rico, and Lukas claimed a table near the far corner, the weight of the morning's training—and the war itself—settling over them like a heavy blanket.

The quiet among them broke when a familiar voice rang out, rich with its usual confidence. “Mind if I join you fine gentlemen?”

Edmund looked up to see Trevor, his old friend from Fort Benning, strolling toward their table with his tray in hand, his trademark smirk firmly in place.

“Trevor,” Edmund said, his tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. “Figured I’d see you again sooner or later.”

“Can’t stay away, Eli,” Trevor quipped, sliding onto the bench next to Edmund. “Too much fun to be had. Besides, I needed someone to keep me company while I carry this war on my back.”

Lukas leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his eyes narrowing as he studied Trevor. You planning to win the war all by yourself, amigo?”

Trevor grinned. “Not all by myself. I figure you’ll make a good sidekick.”

Trevor chuckled, dropping into the seat beside Edmund. He scanned the group briefly, his eyes lingering on Lukas, whose arms were crossed in a stance that radiated defiance. Trevor didn’t bite; instead, he turned his attention to his food.

The silence hung for a beat before Niko cleared his throat. “So, anyone hear the latest? Russians crossed the border in the north yesterday. They’re pushing toward Kyiv.”

Lukas leaned forward, his expression darkening. “I heard. Tanks rolled through Sumy and

Chernihiv. It's not just a push—they're trying to choke the capital."

Trevor glanced up, his grin fading into something sharper. "That fast, huh? Figures they'd throw their weight around early. Shock and awe."

"It's not just shock," Niko said, his tone grim. "It's chaos. Refugees are already moving west. Thousands are trying to cross into Poland."

Rico, who had been quietly eating, finally spoke up. "And what about the east? They're saying Mariupol's under siege."

Lukas muttered something in Spanish, shaking his head. "Mariupol will hold. They don't break easy there."

Trevor set his fork down, his voice cutting through the tension. "It's not about breaking easy. It's about whether they've got the resources to hold out. Doesn't matter how tough you are if the other guy's got all the ammo."

Lukas narrowed his eyes, leaning closer. "You think you've got it all figured out, gringo? These people aren't going to roll over just because Moscow wants them to."

Trevor met his gaze evenly, his tone cool but firm. “Never said they would. But I’ve seen what happens when one side’s got the numbers and the firepower. Tough doesn’t always cut it.”

Edmund, sensing the conversation veering into dangerous territory, interjected. “Enough. We’re all here for the same reason. Let’s focus on what we can do, not what we can’t.”

Niko nodded, his voice steady. “He’s right. We’re here to fight, not argue. And if Mariupol holds, it’ll give the rest of the country time to regroup. That’s what matters.”

Trevor leaned back in his chair, his grin returning faintly. “Fair point. Guess we’ll see how it all plays out soon enough.”

The group fell into a brief silence, the weight of the conversation settling over the table. Trevor leaned back, casually scanning the room as he chewed on a piece of bread. The tension from earlier had eased, leaving a more subdued atmosphere.

Edmund glanced at him, a flicker of curiosity crossing his face. “Hey, Trevor... what actually happened at Fort Benning? I thought you were still under contract for another year?”

Trevor leaned back, crossing his arms. “Well, let’s just say I found a way out. A creative one.”

Edmund frowned, his curiosity growing. “What do you mean, ‘creative’?”

Trevor’s grin widened. “Got a buddy of mine—a doctor—to write up a nice little report saying I was HIV positive. Military doesn’t ask questions after that. They slapped me with an honorable discharge and sent me packing.”

The table fell silent. Even Lukas, who had been half-listening, looked up with a mix of disbelief and disdain.

“You’re serious?” Edmund asked, his tone caught between shock and disbelief.

“As a heart attack,” Trevor replied, popping another piece of bread into his mouth. “Figured it was my best option. I wasn’t about to spend another year scrubbing floors and babysitting privates. Besides, they didn’t want me there any more than I wanted to stay.”

“That’s... insane,” Edmund said, shaking his head. “You do realize what could’ve happened if you got caught?”

Trevor shrugged, utterly unfazed. “Yeah, but I didn’t. And here I am.”

Lucas scoffed, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Qué valiente, gringo. You faked a disease to run away. Real inspiring.”

Trevor shot him a sharp look. “Call it what you want, but I got out clean. Can’t say the same for most guys stuck in that grind.”

Edmund sighed, rubbing his temples. “I don’t even know what to say. That’s just... something else.”

Trevor smirked, leaning forward slightly. “Don’t overthink it, Eli.

Lucas muttered something under his breath in Spanish, shaking his head. Trevor caught the tone, grinned, and decided to let it slide.

The conversation shifted, but Trevor’s revelation lingered in Edmund’s mind, stirring an uneasy mix of amazement and disbelief. The weight of it hung in the air for a moment, unspoken but palpable, as the group fell quiet.

Trevor, ever one to break the silence, leaned back in his chair and shot Edmund a sly grin, his tone

deliberately light. “So, how’s the food here compared to Fort Benning? Let me guess—still tastes like cardboard?”

Edmund blinked, caught off guard by the abrupt change in topic. He let out a short laugh, the tension in his chest loosening a little. “You’re lucky if it even tastes like cardboard.”

Trevor shook his head in mock disappointment, gesturing at his plate. “Figures. Some things never change.”

Lucas, still watching Trevor carefully, smirked faintly. “You’ll get used to it, chico. If you last that long.”

Trevor raised his cup in a mock toast. “Here’s to lasting, then....”

CHAPTER TEN

THE CALM BEFORE

The recruits had just finished a grueling afternoon of tactical drills, their bodies aching and their minds dulled by exhaustion. As they assembled in the rec room for mail call, the usual chatter of camaraderie filled the air, though an underlying tension lingered from the morning's heated debate about the war. The dim winter light filtering through the windows mirrored the solemnity of their thoughts.

Captain Kurpaso stood at the front of the room, flipping through a stack of envelopes with his usual stern efficiency. "Wilson!" he barked, tossing a letter onto the table.

Edmund stepped forward, his heart skipping as he recognized the familiar handwriting of his mother on the envelope. He returned to his seat, clutching the letter as if it were a lifeline. The noise around him faded as he carefully unfolded the paper, the words within pulling him back to a world far from the harsh realities of the camp.

My dear Edmund,

We miss you terribly. Clara sends her love and has included one of her drawings for you (she insists it's her best one yet). Your father doesn't say much, but I know he's proud of you. Every time the news talks about the war in Ukraine, he watches closely, as if he's trying to imagine what it's like for you over there.

I tried calling the base the other day, but they told me that recruits aren't allowed to use their phones during training. They explained that it's to help you all stay focused, which I understand, but it's still hard not to hear your voice. So, I decided to write this letter instead. It feels strange writing like this, but I hope it helps remind you that we're thinking of you every day.

We told your Uncle Yuri about your plans to join the Ukrainian military. He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "He's doing the right thing." You know how much he values standing up for what's right, even when it's difficult. He also told us that he has plans to visit you when you're there. He said he wants to make sure you're okay.

Edmund, we are so incredibly proud of you. I know the training must be grueling, but you've always been so strong and determined. Just promise me you'll take care of yourself, no matter how hard it gets. Remember, you have a family here who loves you more than words can express. We're counting down the days until we can see you again.

Stay safe, my dear boy. You're always in our thoughts and prayers.

Love, Mom.

Edmund folded the letter carefully, slipping it into his pocket as the voices around him came back into focus. The room buzzed with soldiers sharing snippets from home, but Edmund remained silent, lost in thought. The mention of

Uncle Yuri and Kyiv resonated deeply. His mother's words weren't just a reminder of what he was fighting for—they were a call to action.

Trevor, seated nearby, nudged Edmund with a grin. "What's the verdict? Family still think you're the golden child?"

Edmund managed a faint smile. "Something like that."

Trevor leaned back, his tone light but probing. "They're worried about you being here?"

"More about what comes next," Edmund admitted, glancing at Trevor. "My uncle's in Kyiv. He's staying put, even with the Russians closing in."

Trevor nodded, his usual bravado tempered by an uncharacteristic seriousness. "That's rough. Takes guts to stay in the thick of it."

"Or stubbornness," Edmund said, his voice tinged with frustration. "But I get it. He's defending what's his."

Across the table, Niko leaned forward, his tone grim. "Kyiv won't fall easily. The Russians underestimated Ukraine's resolve. They thought

it would be over in days, but now? The whole world's watching."

Rico chimed in, his voice quieter than usual. "Yeah, but watching isn't enough. People are dying, and all we do is send weapons and words. It feels... hollow."

Lukas, ever the skeptic, scoffed. "It's politics, amigo. Countries don't care about morals—they care about power. Ukraine's just the latest battleground in a bigger game."

Trevor interjected, his voice steady. "Maybe, but that doesn't mean the fight isn't worth it. Power or not, people are standing up for their homes. That counts for something."

The conversation ebbed and flowed, each recruit sharing their perspective. Finally, Edmund spoke, his voice firm. Sitting here, training, waiting... it's not enough. There are people out there risking everything for what they believe in. And here we are, talking about it like it's just another headline."

The table fell silent, the weight of Edmund's words sinking in. Trevor met his gaze, nodding slightly in agreement. "You're right, Eli. But it's

not just about what we feel—it's about what we do. And when the time comes, we'll know."

As the conversation wound down, Edmund sat back, his mind racing. The letter from home, the stories from the front lines, the camaraderie of his fellow recruits—it all pointed to one undeniable truth: he had to act. But what that action would be, he wasn't yet sure.

The recruits sat in the cramped briefing room, the hum of the overhead lights mixing with the distant echoes of gunfire outside the base. A dusty map of Ukraine was pinned to the front wall, covered in red marks, arrows, and hastily scribbled notations that painted a grim picture of the battlefield. Captain Kurpaso stood at the front, his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze sharp and unyielding as he surveyed the young soldiers before him. They were weeks into their training, hardened but still untested, and now, as Kyiv burned and Russian forces pushed deeper into Ukraine, the gravity of their situation pressed down on them like an iron weight.

Kurpaso exhaled sharply, his voice cutting through the room like a whip. "Listen up. The war is moving fast, and it's not waiting for any of you to be ready. The Russians came in thinking they'd have us on our knees in forty-eight hours." He tapped the map with two fingers, his tone

laced with contempt. “We are now on day three, and they still don’t have Kyiv.”

Edmund leaned forward, arms crossed, his expression grim. “But they’re close.”

Kurpaso nodded. “They are. Russian forces pushed south from Belarus and broke through the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone on the first day. Their airborne units tried to take Hostomel Airport northwest of Kyiv, aiming to turn it into a staging ground for more troops and heavy armor. Our National Guard and special forces hit them **hard**, and we nearly wiped them out, but they kept sending reinforcements. Now, Hostomel is contested. If they secure it, they’ll have a direct corridor to fly in more troops.”

Niko, ever composed but analytical, rubbed his chin as he studied the map. “So, what’s stopping them from just pushing through? If they’ve got the numbers, why aren’t we seeing tanks rolling down every street already?”

Kurpaso’s lips curled in something resembling approval. “Good question. What’s stopping them is **us**. The resistance across Ukraine has been relentless. In the north, near Chernihiv and Sumy, our forces have slowed their advance, forcing them to divert units that were meant to encircle Kyiv. In the east, Kharkiv was supposed

to fall in a matter of hours. Instead, the Russians were met with Molotov cocktails, anti-tank teams, and street-to-street fighting. The city is holding, and their casualties are mounting.”

Lukas scoffed, shaking his head. “Yeah, but how long can we keep this up? They’ve got way more tanks, planes, firepower—hell, they could just bomb the city until there’s nothing left.”

Kurpaso’s expression darkened. “That’s exactly what they’re trying to do. Civilian areas are getting hit. Apartment buildings, hospitals—no target is off-limits to them. Just this morning, a missile struck a residential tower on Lobanovskiy Avenue. Twenty civilians dead, more injured. That’s what we’re up against.” He let the words hang in the air, allowing the weight of the situation to settle over them.

Rico shifted uncomfortably. “And what about Kyiv itself? Are we surrounded?”

Kurpaso tapped the map again, dragging his finger around the city. “Not yet. The main force advancing from the north is trying to push into Kyiv from the west and northwest. The bridge at Irpin? Blown up **yesterday** to slow them down. They’ll need time to reroute. Meanwhile, Vasylykiv Air Base to the south was attacked last night by Russian paratroopers. They wanted to

seize it to land more forces behind us. But our air defenses shot down two **Il-76** transport planes full of them. That's hundreds of Russian troops who won't be joining the fight."

Trevor, sitting at the back, let out a low whistle. "Damn. That's gotta hurt."

Kurpaso didn't smile. "It does. And that's the key to everything. We can't match them man for man, tank for tank. But if we keep disrupting their supply lines, hitting them where it hurts, making every damn kilometer a **bloodbath**, we can grind them down."

Edmund leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "And what about reinforcements? Are we getting any help from NATO?"

Kurpaso's jaw clenched for a brief second before he exhaled through his nose. "No NATO troops are coming. No jets, no boots on the ground. The world is watching, condemning, sanctioning—but we are fighting this war **alone**." He let that sink in before adding, "But that doesn't mean we're without support. The UK, the US, Poland, and others are sending weapons. Javelins, NLAWs, Stingers—anti-tank and anti-air weapons that can even the playing field."

Lukas exhaled sharply, his voice edged with frustration. “So they’ll send us toys but not bodies.”

Kurpaso shot him a sharp look. “Be grateful for what we’re getting. Those ‘toys’ are the reason we’ve turned dozens of Russian tanks into burning wrecks. They don’t own the skies either. Our pilots, some of the best in the world, are still **fighting**. And we’re making them pay for every inch they try to take.”

Niko drummed his fingers against his knee. “Mariupol—what’s the situation there?”

Kurpaso’s expression grew even graver. “It’s bad. The Russians are trying to encircle the city. If they cut it off, it’ll be brutal. We expect street-to-street fighting, just like in Kyiv. But the Azov Battalion and other units are dug in. They won’t go down easy.”

A silence settled over the room. The reality of what was coming—of what they would soon be thrown into—was impossible to ignore. The war wasn’t just something happening **out there** anymore. It was inching closer, block by block, street by street.

Kurpaso stepped away from the map and faced them directly. "Kyiv is the prize. The Russians want it because taking the capital means breaking the heart of Ukraine. If they capture it, they install their puppet government, and this war gets a hell of a lot harder for us. But they won't take it easily." His voice dropped into something even more dangerous. "Because they're not just fighting soldiers. They're fighting **Ukrainians**."

A tense silence followed, but this time it was different. The fear, the doubt—it was still there, lingering beneath the surface—but so was something else. Resolve. The understanding that **they** were now part of this fight.

The briefing room was thick with tension, the air heavy with the weight of everything that had led up to this moment. The recruits sat shoulder to shoulder, eyes locked on Captain Kurpaso as he stood at the front, the cold light of the projector casting shadows across his face. His hands gripped the podium, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade.

"Tomorrow at **0700 hours**, you will undertake your final test," he announced, his gaze locking onto each recruit like a hunter sizing up his prey. "This is what separates you from the rest. This is **Перехід—The Passage**. Twenty miles out, twenty

miles back. No GPS. one radio per team, and no second chances. **You either finish, or you fail.**"

The recruits didn't move. They knew this wasn't just another training exercise. This was the final test before war.

Kurpaso turned to the map projected on the wall, his finger tracing the path through the countryside. "Your objective is **Lisok**, a village twenty miles from here. At the center of that village is a church. Inside that church, on the altar, is **The Medal of the Passage**. The first squad to return with it will be reviewed for **special forces selection**. You want to be the best? **This is your chance.**"

A ripple of murmurs spread through the room. Special forces selection. That was more than just a medal. That was a future.

Trevor let out a low whistle, leaning toward Edmund. "Now that's a prize worth running for."

Kurpaso ignored him. "You will be moving in **squads of four**. Your team is your lifeline. Lose your team, you fail. Return late, you fail. Take the wrong route, fail. And if I hear **one complaint from civilians** about 'armed men sneaking around

their farms,' the squad responsible will **start over**. Get caught twice? **You're out**."

Lukas crossed his arms, unimpressed. "And what if we run into civilians anyway?"

Kurpaso's eyes locked onto him. "Then you **don't**. You go around, you backtrack, you do whatever you have to do to remain unseen. This is about **land navigation, speed, and stealth**. If you can't move unnoticed in friendly territory, you sure as hell won't last on the front."

Rico exhaled sharply. "This is insane."

Kurpaso smirked. "Then it's perfect preparation for Kyiv."

A heavy silence followed. Kyiv. **The front**. It was no longer an abstract concept. This was the last step before deployment.

Kurpaso continued. "There will be **instructors at each checkpoint along the way**. If you don't check in, you're out. If you don't follow the terrain correctly, you're out. If you take shortcuts, **I will know**." His voice darkened. "And if you return without the medal, you sure as hell won't be considered for special forces."

The projector flicked to the squads. Kurpaso unfolded a piece of paper and read, his voice even. **"Squad One: Edmund, Trevor, Lukas, Rico. Squad Two: Niko, Marquez, Petrenko, Kozlov."** He barely paused before continuing, his tone unwavering as he rattled off more names. "Squad Three: Marchenko, Ivanov, Horvat, Litvin. Squad Four: Tkachuk, Moreno, Volkov, Solis. Squad Five..." The names kept coming, one after another, recruits locking eyes with their new teammates, some nodding in quiet acceptance, others shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

Edmund felt Trevor nudge him with an elbow. "Not a bad squad, huh?" he muttered. Lukas shot him a look but said nothing. Rico exhaled, rubbing his temples.

Kurpaso stepped forward, his voice lowering just slightly. "Tomorrow, you prove whether or not you're ready. Whether or not you belong on the front. Whether or not you have what it takes to fight." His gaze swept across the recruits, his next words spoken slowly and deliberately. **"The Passage is your final test. Pass it, and you'll deploy. Fail... and you won't even set foot on the battlefield."**

The room remained silent. Even Trevor wasn't smirking anymore.

Tomorrow, it wouldn't be a drill. **Tomorrow, it was time to prove themselves—or be left behind.**

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PASSAGE

Rico lay awake long before the alarm sounded, staring at the wooden slats of the bunk above him. His fingers drummed lightly against the coarse fabric of his blanket, his breathing slow and deliberate, but his mind raced. He'd run the route over and over in his head. Twenty miles to Lisok, grab the medal, twenty miles back. Simple on paper. But out there, in the cold, in the dark, under the watchful eyes of instructors hidden at every checkpoint, it wouldn't be simple. And if they were seen? If a single civilian spotted them and reported it?

Start over.

His stomach twisted. It wasn't fear, not exactly. More like an itch under his skin, an awareness

that he couldn't shake. He turned his head, glancing around the barracks. Most of the others were still asleep—if they were sleeping at all.

A bunk creaked. Lucas swung his legs over the side, rubbing his face with both hands. "This is going to be hell," he muttered.

Trevor, already lacing his boots, smirked. "Twenty miles, in and out, grab the shiny prize? Could be worse."

Edmund sat up, rolling his shoulders. "Could be better," he murmured.

Across the room, Niko cracked his knuckles and shot a look at Marquez. "You ready?"

Marquez, tightening the straps on his pack, exhaled. "Ready as I'll ever be."

The barracks stirred, bodies shifting, boots hitting the floor. The air was heavy with unspoken tension. No one needed reminding of what today was. No more drills, no more lectures, no more training exercises. This was it. The Passage. Their final test.

Rico swung his legs over the side of his bunk and sat for a moment, elbows on his knees, staring

down at his boots. The knot in his stomach tightened. He clenched his jaw, inhaling through his nose. No time for doubt.

Edmund clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. "Let's go."

They dressed in silence, layering up against the cold, checking straps, making sure everything was in place. Every movement felt heavier than usual, more deliberate. When they stepped outside, the winter air hit them like a slap, sharp and unforgiving. The gravel crunched beneath their boots as they made their way toward the assembly area.

Floodlights cast long shadows across the training yard. Instructors stood nearby, their faces unreadable, their clipboards tucked under their arms. Captain Kurpaso was already there, standing near the start line, hands clasped behind his back. His gaze swept over them, cold and measured.

The squads lined up. Edmund, Trevor, Lucas, and Rico in one. Niko and Marquez a few yards away with their team. The others behind them, all silent, waiting.

Kurpaso checked his watch, then looked up. His voice, sharp and authoritative, cut through the cold morning air. "You know the rules. You make it to Lisok, retrieve the medal from the church, and return within eight hours. No shortcuts, no civilians, no mistakes." He gestured toward the map behind him, the checkpoints marked in red.

"Checkpoint One is five miles in, at the old hunting lodge. If you don't pass through, you're out. Checkpoint Two is ten miles in, where the river cuts through the valley. Cross the wrong way, you're out. Checkpoint Three is fifteen miles in, right outside Lisok, at the radio tower. Make it there, you're almost done. But if you skip a checkpoint or miss a sign-in, don't bother coming back." He let that sink in before adding, "And if you return without the medal, you sure as hell won't be considered for special forces."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the recruits.

Trevor let out a low whistle, leaning toward Edmund. "Now that's a prize worth running for."

Kurpaso ignored him. "You will be moving in squads of four. Your team is your lifeline. Lose your team, you fail. Return late, you fail." He let his gaze linger on them, making sure they understood the gravity of the test. "This is not a game. This is about proving you can move,

navigate, and survive without hand-holding. You want to fight on the front? You want to serve in Kyiv? Then you better prove you can handle the basics.”

He gave one final glance at his watch. No more speeches. No last-minute advice. The time for that had passed.

He raised the pistol.

The crack of the gunshot shattered the stillness.

Edmund took off first, boots pounding against the dirt, his breath steady. Trevor was right beside him, moving with effortless ease, while Lucas kept pace just behind. Rico lagged for only a moment before locking in step, his breathing sharp but controlled.

The treeline came fast, the open field behind them disappearing as they plunged into the forest. The world shifted. No more floodlights. No more open space. Just trees, shadows, and the sound of their own movement.

Edmund threw up a fist. Halt.

They crouched, listening.

No voices. No footsteps. No sign of the other squads.

Trevor leaned in. "Which way?"

Edmund pulled out the map, his eyes scanning the terrain. The first checkpoint wasn't far, but distance wasn't the challenge. It was precision. If they deviated even slightly, they'd waste time correcting course.

He pointed west. "We cut through here, follow the ridgeline. Should keep us out of sight."

Lucas nodded. "Let's move."

They pressed on, ducking low, moving with purpose. The underbrush clawed at their gear as they maneuvered through the thick forest, every step calculated. The air was sharp with the scent of damp earth and frost.

Rico exhaled sharply

Lucas flashed him a grin. "You'd rather be in the barracks?"

They moved in silence after that, each step bringing them closer to Lisok, closer to the

medal, closer to whatever came next.

The forest was a vast, breathing thing, its canopy stretching over them like a protective shroud as Edmund's team moved in near silence. The pre-dawn air carried a biting chill, and every step sent a muffled crunch through the frost-bitten underbrush. The only light came from the moon, a dull glow filtering through the skeletal branches, painting long shadows that danced as they passed. The cold had settled into Rico's bones, his breath coming in quiet puffs as he followed just behind Lucas.

Lucas glanced over his shoulder, his voice low but laced with amusement. "*¿Estás bien, tío? No me vayas a desmayar ahora.*" (You good, kid? Don't go passing out on me now.)

Rico let out a quiet scoff, rubbing his gloved hands together. "*Yo estoy bien, Pero si sigues fastidiando, te voy a tropezar.*" (I'm fine, asshole. But if you keep messing with me, I'm tripping you.)

Lucas grinned, keeping his pace steady. "*¿Tropezarme? Venga ya, eso ni lo sueñes. Todavía te falta pan para eso.*" (Trip me? Yeah, right. You've got a long way to go before you can pull that off.)

Edmund, just a few paces ahead, shot them both a sharp look. “Enough. Save the chatter for later.” He adjusted the map in his hand, eyes locked on the terrain. The forest opened into a fork ahead—one path leading up toward the ridgeline, the other dipping into a dried-up riverbed.

Trevor exhaled, already seeing the options. “You wanna go high or low?”

“Ridge,” Edmund answered without hesitation. “Slower, but controlled.”

Lucas let out an sigh, “Always with the safe choice...”

“Because it works,” Edmund shot back.

Lucas smirked.

Edmund didn’t even look up from his map. “keep moving.”

Lucas chuckled under his breath but obeyed, and the squad pressed forward, slipping into the shadows of the trees.

Further east, Niko’s team moved with surgical precision, the cold air biting at their faces as

they advanced. The terrain was tighter here, the undergrowth thicker, the path more treacherous. Every step required careful footing. Marquez walked slightly behind Niko, his fingers drumming against the strap of his rifle.

Then—movement ahead.

Four figures, fifty meters away, moving fast. Another squad.

Niko signaled for a halt, his breath steady as his sharp eyes analyzed the situation. The other squad was on the established trail, moving at a disciplined pace. They hadn't seen Niko's team yet—but that wouldn't last long.

Marquez exhaled. "We can pass them."

Kozlov grinned, cracking his knuckles. "If we sprint, we take the lead."

Petrenko, ever the realist, shook his head. "And burn ourselves out before Checkpoint One?"

Niko considered their options. The trail ahead was predictable—safe but slow. But just to their right, an unmarked section of dense forest climbed steeply uphill, riddled with brambles and deadfall. It would be a brutal climb, but if

they moved fast enough, they could bypass the squad and emerge ahead.

Petrenko read his mind. "You're thinking of cutting through, aren't you?"

Niko nodded. "It's a gamble, but we can beat them to the checkpoint if we push."

Kozlov's grin widened. "Now *that* is a strategy I like."

Marquez adjusted his pack. "Hope you all like climbing."

With a silent signal, they veered off the path, slipping into the underbrush like shadows. The race was on.

The terrain had begun to shift as Edmund's team neared the first checkpoint. The dense forest gradually thinned, revealing patches of frost-covered grass and skeletal trees that stood silent under the pale morning light. They had been moving for nearly an hour, their pace steady, their breath misting in the cold air.

Edmund led from the front, moving with sharp precision, eyes constantly scanning for movement. His grip on his rifle was firm, but not

tense—controlled. Behind him, the others followed, their movements careful and measured. They weren't just recruits running a training exercise anymore. This was a test, the last step before real combat, and they all felt it.

Rico moved just behind him, unusually quiet. His normal confidence had given way to something more restrained, his hands gripping the straps of his pack just a little too tightly. The weight of the moment was sinking in, pressing against his chest like a vice. Lucas, walking beside him, noticed but said nothing. There was no need for words—Rico wasn't the only one feeling it.

Trevor, ever the wildcard, was the first to break the silence. "I'll say this," he muttered, adjusting his rifle strap, "this whole 'land navigation' thing is a hell of a lot less exciting than it sounds."

"Shut up, Trevor," Edmund said without looking back.

Trevor exhaled a quiet chuckle but didn't push further.

They pressed on, the crunch of their boots on the frozen ground the only sound filling the

stillness. Edmund checked his watch—fifty-five minutes since they had left the base. They should be close. His eyes flicked to the map, then to the terrain ahead. There—just past the thinning tree line—was a shallow, dried-up creek bed. That meant the checkpoint was near.

He slowed his pace, raising a fist. The team halted immediately, lowering their profiles, rifles at the ready. Edmund scanned the area ahead, his instincts prickling. Something felt off.

Then he saw him.

Barely distinguishable from the surroundings, an instructor stood motionless at the tree line, watching them. His camouflaged uniform blended perfectly with the environment, making him nearly invisible. Had Edmund not been hyper-alert, they might have walked right past him.

Edmund held his position for a moment, then exhaled. “We’re here.”

The others followed his gaze. Rico stiffened slightly but kept his breathing steady. Lucas simply nodded. Trevor smirked but, for once, kept quiet.

The instructor remained motionless for another few seconds before reaching into his vest and retrieving a laminated card. Without a word, he held it out. Edmund stepped forward, took it, and glanced down. A simple number was printed on it: 1.

The man tapped his watch. **Fifty-eight minutes.**

Not bad.

“One down,” the instructor finally said, his voice calm and unreadable. “Two to go.”

Without another word, he turned and disappeared back into the tree line, as if he had never been there at all.

Edmund pocketed the card and adjusted his rifle strap. “Next checkpoint’s five miles out. Let’s move.”

No one complained. No one hesitated. As one, the team pressed forward, vanishing into the trees once more.

Niko’s team moved with disciplined efficiency, their strides measured, their breathing steady. They had covered a good distance in under an hour, but the weight of the mission hung heavy

over them. The cold air bit at their exposed skin, but no one complained—there was no time for that.

Marquez moved just behind Niko, his usual quiet presence barely making a sound as he navigated the uneven ground. Petrenko, a lean but sturdy Ukrainian recruit, adjusted his rifle strap as he moved, his sharp eyes scanning the tree line with practiced vigilance. Kozlov, bringing up the rear, wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, his breath coming in steady puffs against the frozen air.

They had been gaining ground for the past fifteen minutes, the forest around them growing denser, the sunlight filtering through the branches in broken patches. Unlike Edmund's team, they didn't speak much. There was no need. Each man knew his role, his purpose.

"We should be close," Niko murmured, glancing at his watch. Fifty-nine minutes had passed.

Marquez nodded. "Terrain matches the map. If we keep this pace, we'll hit the checkpoint any second now."

Ahead, a slight movement in the underbrush made Petrenko freeze mid-step, his hand

tightening around his rifle. The rest of the team stopped instantly, eyes locking onto the source. A shadow moved just beyond the tree line—silent, watching.

“Instructor,” Niko muttered.

They held their position, waiting. The figure stepped forward just enough to reveal himself—a man dressed in full camouflage, his face unreadable. He reached into his vest, retrieved a laminated card, and held it out.

Niko approached, his expression calm but focused. The card had a single number printed on it: **1**.

They were just behind Edmund’s team.

The instructor checked his watch, then gave Niko a brief nod. **One hour, three minutes.**

Not bad, but not good enough.

Niko pocketed the card and turned back to his team. “No delays. We pick up the pace.”

No one objected. They all understood.

Without another word, they pushed forward, slipping into the trees like ghosts, their movements blending seamlessly with the forest around them. The next checkpoint awaited, and they had no intention of coming in second.

The forest had begun to thin as Edmund's squad moved carefully through the undergrowth, the crunch of frostbitten leaves under their boots barely audible beneath their steady, controlled breaths. They had been keeping a tight pace for the past hour, muscles aching but minds sharp, navigating through a narrow section of woods bordering a rural road. The first checkpoint was already behind them, but the real challenge was maintaining their cover—one wrong move, one sighting, and they'd be forced to start over.

Edmund raised a fist, signaling a halt. His sharp eyes had caught movement up ahead, past a break in the tree line. The others stopped immediately, dropping into a crouch. Trevor adjusted the strap of his pack, whispering, "What do you see?"

Edmund didn't respond right away. He motioned for the others to get lower and pointed toward the open road. Just beyond the tree line, a squad ahead of them was breaking cover—running across the asphalt, moving fast. For a split second, it looked clean, efficient. But then—

“Shit,” Rico breathed, his voice barely audible.

A civilian—a middle-aged woman bundled in a thick coat—stood a few yards away near a parked Lada, holding up a smartphone. The unmistakable sight of a woman lifting her camera to her eye, her fingers poised over the shutter button, captured the moment in a single, precise motion.

Lucas swore under his breath. “Idiotas... they’re done.”

The squad across the road had no idea they had been spotted. They disappeared into the trees on the other side, oblivious to the consequences of their exposure. Edmund knew what would happen next. If that woman reported them—if a single call went through to the authorities—the entire squad would be yanked back to the start. Their race to Lisok would be over before it even truly began.

“We can’t cross here,” Edmund said firmly, already adjusting their course in his head.

Trevor frowned. “What if she doesn’t report them?”

“Doesn’t matter. If there’s even a chance, we’re not risking it,” Edmund replied, scanning the landscape. “We go around.”

Lucas sighed, his breath visible in the cold. “That’ll add at least fifteen minutes.”

“Better than starting over,” Rico muttered, adjusting the strap on his rifle as he took a quick glance back toward the road. The woman was still standing there, scrolling on her phone, probably checking if the picture had come out clear.

Trevor exhaled in frustration. “Fine. Lead the way.”

Edmund wasted no time. He pivoted, guiding them deeper into the woods, angling their approach away from the road and toward a low ditch that ran parallel to it. They moved carefully, staying crouched to keep from being seen in case the woman glanced in their direction. Every step had to be deliberate, silent. This wasn’t just about reaching Lisok—it was about proving they could move unseen, avoid detection, stay disciplined.

After several tense minutes, the road curved ahead, and Edmund spotted an opportunity. A

bend in the terrain provided just enough natural cover for them to cross undetected. He signaled for the others to move quickly, and one by one, they rushed across the dirt path, their boots landing lightly as they slipped back into the safety of the trees.

They pressed on, the only sound the steady rhythm of their breathing and the wind threading through the branches above. Edmund kept his focus forward, but he knew what they had just witnessed would serve as a warning. The other squad had made a mistake. He wouldn't let his team do the same.

Lucas broke the silence first. "That was close."

"Too close," Rico muttered.

Trevor smirked. "Bet they're already getting their asses handed to them back at base."

Edmund didn't respond, but he hoped Trevor was right. Mistakes had consequences, and soon, they'd see just how many other squads were still in the race.

They moved deeper into the woods, their focus sharp, their pace steady.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FINAL TRIAL

The dense forest pressed in around them as Edmund's squad moved carefully through the trees, their breath steady but their nerves beginning to fray. It had been nearly twenty minutes since they were supposed to reach the second checkpoint, yet there was no sign of the instructor. The markers along the route had been clear—this was the right place—but the checkpoint was empty, as if the instructor had never been there at all.

Lucas exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "This doesn't make sense. We should've seen them by now."

Edmund checked his watch. Time was slipping away, and the more they stood still, the more they were falling behind. "They wouldn't just abandon the checkpoint," he muttered. His gaze flicked to Rico, who shifted uneasily, scanning the trees like something might lunge out from them.

"Maybe we missed it," Rico suggested, though he didn't sound convinced. "Or maybe the guy's just waiting to pop out and scare the hell out of us."

Trevor scoffed. "Wouldn't put it past Kurpaso. Guy loves his little surprises."

Edmund wasn't laughing. Something was off. He pressed the radio clipped to his vest. "Checkpoint Two, this is Wilson. Do you copy?"

Nothing. A burst of static crackled through the speaker.

He tried again. "Captain, this is Wilson. We're at the second checkpoint, but there's no instructor. Please advise."

Silence. More static, then nothing.

Trevor frowned. "Radio's acting up?"

Edmund shook his head. "This is a dead line."

Before anyone could respond, movement ahead made them all freeze. Dark silhouettes moved between the trees, and Edmund's squad instinctively lowered themselves, hands near their rifles.

Then a familiar voice broke through the quiet. "Wilson?"

Niko's squad emerged from the shadows, their postures tense, their eyes scanning for danger. The relief was brief.

"You too?" Niko asked as he stepped forward.

Edmund nodded. "Yeah. No instructor. No sign anyone was even here."

Marquez wiped sweat from his brow. "That's not all. You been getting anything on the radio?"

Edmund exchanged a glance with Niko.

"We've been trying to reach Kurpaso," Niko said, his voice lower now. "Nothing but dead air."

Rico's brow furrowed. "You think maybe... another squad's jamming us or something?"

Petrenko, one of Niko's men, let out a dry laugh. "Oh yeah, because they smuggled an electronic warfare unit into this little game? Give me a break."

"Or they're just screwing around," Kozlov added with a shrug. "Wouldn't be the first time someone tried to mess with another squad."

Trevor leaned against a tree, unconcerned. "Bet you it's those guys from Squad Five. They got a bunch of hotshots trying to play mind games. Probably stole the instructor's gear just to throw us off."

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right. But joke's on them—we're still getting that medallion."

Edmund, however, wasn't convinced. "Then explain the radio silence," he said. "Kurpaso wouldn't ignore calls unless something was wrong."

Silence followed. For a brief moment, even the usual banter died down.

Then, **the static returned**—a sharp, irregular buzz crackling through the radio, followed by a burst of garbled noise. It came from ahead, somewhere beyond the trees.

“Been hearing that for a while,” Niko muttered. His eyes flicked to the horizon, where, just barely visible, the metal skeleton of the **radio tower** loomed in the distance.

“That’s the third checkpoint,” Edmund realized.

Niko nodded. “If anything weird is happening, that’s where we’ll find out.”

The decision was made without further discussion. Both squads fell into formation, their usual swagger tempered by unease. The forest stretched out before them, a quiet, looming thing that swallowed the last of the daylight.

They moved toward the tower, toward the unknown,

The rhythm of the march became mechanical, their boots pressing into damp earth, their breaths steady and controlled. Step, check the map, scan the trees. The sky above had shifted from a muted gray to the deeper hues of an

impending dusk, the sun creeping lower with each passing moment.

The radio remained eerily silent. Every few minutes, Edmund or Niko tried reaching Captain Kurpaso. Nothing. No orders, no status updates—just dead air and the occasional burst of static that crackled and fizzled out. The unease in both squads grew, though no one spoke of it. Not yet.

Edmund checked his watch. Nearly thirty minutes had passed since the last checkpoint. They were closing in on the radio tower.

Ahead, Niko's team moved with precision, slipping between the trees with the cautious grace of trained soldiers. They were the first to break into the clearing, their eyes locking onto the towering steel frame of the radio tower standing like a skeletal giant against the darkening sky.

Niko's stomach tightened at the sight ahead.

Two bodies.

One lay motionless on the ground, the stark white of his recruit armband stained crimson. The other was barely clinging to life, slumped

against a tree, his chest heaving in short, ragged breaths.

"Shit," Marquez hissed, his rifle already raised as they advanced.

Niko dropped to a crouch and moved in, signaling his squad to fan out. He reached the wounded recruit, grabbing his vest, eyes scanning for an injury. Blood coated the recruit's fingers as he weakly clutched his abdomen. His lips moved, trying to form words, his pupils wide with pain and fear.

"They're... they're here," he croaked, barely above a whisper. "Jamming... missile... defense..."

Niko's pulse hammered in his ears. Russians.

He turned sharply, his breath catching in his throat, his mind racing through options. They had to—

Pop.

A sharp, muffled sound split the air, almost lost in the wind.

For a brief second, Niko didn't understand what had happened. Then, Marquez—jerked forward as if yanked by an invisible force, a thin spray of blood misting the air before his lifeless body crumpled to the ground.

A single shot. Precise. Silent.

Sniper.

Niko's breath caught, his veins turning to ice. His body moved before his mind could fully process it. His lungs burned as he threw himself backward, scrambling for cover as a sickening realization clawed up his spine.

"RUSSIANS!" he roared.

His voice cut through the air like a whip. The world snapped into chaos.

From behind them, Edmund's team had just emerged from the tree line. The second Niko's voice reached them, Edmund's instincts took over.

"TAKE COVER!" he bellowed.

Lucas shoved Rico down behind a fallen tree as Edmund and Trevor dived into the underbrush, rifles up, eyes scanning the ridgeline.

The silence of the forest was gone, replaced by the electric hum of imminent violence.

Niko sprinted, his heart hammering against his ribs as the forest around him erupted into chaos. Gunfire ripped through the trees, splintering bark and kicking up dirt as Russian rounds rained down from the northeastern hill. He dove behind a felled tree, his chest heaving as he pressed his back against the rough bark. His rifle was tight in his grip, his fingers slick with sweat.

"Petrenko! Koslov! Report!" he barked between breaths.

"Alive!" Koslov answered from somewhere to his left, his voice sharp with adrenaline.

"Taking fire!" Petrenko's voice came from farther back, strained but controlled.

Niko pressed his back against the fallen tree, breath coming in sharp bursts as Russian fire tore through the underbrush around him. He peeked over the edge of his cover, eyes locking

onto the enemy position near the radio tower. Muzzle flashes illuminated figures moving in the darkness, but one caught his attention immediately—an officer, crouched beside a strange device. Wires coiled around it like veins, a blinking blue light pulsing in steady rhythm. *EMP.*

Niko's gut twisted. If that thing went off, every electronic system in the area—including missile defense—would be wiped out.

His grip tightened on his rifle, but something else sent a shiver down his spine. The officer turned slightly, allowing Niko a clearer look at his face. Or what was left of it. A metallic jaw glinted in the darkness, sleek and unnatural, an advanced prosthetic unlike anything Niko had ever seen. It wasn't crude like battlefield repairs—this was precision engineering. A silent question formed in his mind: *Who the hell is this guy?*

Niko shifted, biting back a curse. His team was pinned. He couldn't get a clear shot from here, but he knew who could. His head snapped in the direction of Edmund's last known position, his squad further south, lower on the incline. He grabbed his flashlight and angled it toward the Russian position, using his hand to quickly flick it on and off—a silent signal in the darkness.

Across the clearing, Edmund crouched behind a rotting log, rifle up, eyes locked on Niko's position. The flickering light caught his attention instantly. Three short flashes—enemy position spotted. Then two long flashes—*open fire*.

Edmund's jaw tightened as he turned to his squad. "Lucas, Rico, Trevor—fire northeast! Suppress their position!"

"¡Por fin, acción tío!" Lucas muttered, rolling his shoulders as he steadied his aim.

"Light 'em up!" Edmund ordered.

Their rifles erupted in unison, sending a hailstorm of rounds into the Russian position. The once-dominant enemy fire faltered under the sudden, aggressive push. Tracers cut through the night, illuminating the battlefield in violent flashes. Bark exploded off trees, dirt kicked up in plumes, and the Russians, caught off guard, scrambled for cover.

Edmund lined up his sights, about to open fire—then something stopped him cold.

His rifle was raised, finger hovering over the trigger, but for the briefest moment, the officer

with the prosthetic jaw turned his head and locked eyes with him.

It was only a second. A flicker in the chaos. But in that instant, something passed between them. A knowing. The officer didn't flinch, didn't move. He simply stared, his unreadable gaze illuminated by the cold glow of the EMP's blinking light.

Then, all at once, smoke erupted across the Russian position.

"Shit—smoke!" Edmund snapped.

Thick, dense plumes spilled into the night, swallowing the battlefield in seconds. The Russians weren't retreating—they were covering themselves.

Niko didn't hesitate. "Move up! We need to get closer before they set off the EMP!"

With enemy fire suppressed and the Russians shrouded in smoke, both squads surged forward, advancing toward the radio tower before it was too late.

The air was thick with smoke, turning the battlefield into a swirling nightmare of flashing

muzzle fire and dark, shifting figures. The Russians weren't retreating. They were repositioning.

"They're too fast," Lucas grunted, pressing his back against a tree as he fired off another shot. His breathing was labored, his movements slightly slower "Joder... they're moving like pros."

Rico was reloading furiously beside him, his Puerto Rican accent thick with tension. "Estos cabrones no son normales."

Edmund wiped the sweat and dirt from his brow, his instincts screaming at him that something wasn't right. These weren't regular Russian troops. There were no clumsy movements, no panicked voices. They moved with precision, their suppressors keeping their gunfire sharp and controlled.

Then Edmund saw it—one of the fallen Russians had high-end night vision optics strapped to his helmet. Another had no insignia on his uniform, just matte-black gear designed for night operations.

It clicked.

"They're Wagner," Edmund spat, his voice laced with realization. "Private military. These bastards are the real deal."

Niko's squad was closer to the radio tower, using the charred husk of an abandoned vehicle as cover. The Russian officer was still working on the EMP device, the blinking blue light of the transmitter pulsing in the fog.

Petrenko poked his head out to get a better look — and immediately ducked back as bullets shredded the metal beside him.

"We need to push forward!" Koslov yelled, firing blind through the smoke.

Then a grenade landed right in front of them.

Petrenko's eyes widened. He didn't hesitate—he dove for it, grabbed it with both hands, and threw it back.

It exploded mid-air.

For one second, Niko thought they had survived it. Then a silenced round slammed into Petrenko's skull.

His body crumpled instantly.

"NO!" Koslov roared, his rage overtaking his fear. He vaulted over cover, unloading his magazine with reckless fury.

His shots hit their mark—one Russian mercenary fell, then another.

But a burst of automatic fire shredded through Koslov's torso.

He staggered, blood spraying from his mouth, before collapsing beside Petrenko.

Niko couldn't move.

His squad was gone.

But the Russian officer didn't even glance at the bodies. He was focused on the EMP device, reaching for his wrist-mounted communicator.

And then—another grenade arced toward Niko's position.

This time, he had no chance.

It exploded right beside him.

Niko's body was thrown like a ragdoll, crashing into the ground. His ears rang violently, his vision swimming as pain ripped through his limbs.

He was still conscious, barely, but he couldn't move.

Southeast of the EMP Device, Edmund saw the explosion and Niko go down.

The firefight had turned into a chaotic brawl, thick with smoke, gunfire, and the screams of the dying. The enemy was still holding the high ground, but Edmund knew they had to close the distance. The EMP device was still active. The Russian officer was still standing. If they didn't stop him, it wouldn't matter how many Russians they killed—**the base was open for a missile attack.**

"Rico! Lucas! Cover the advance!" Edmund barked.

Lucas, still crouched behind cover, clapped Rico on the shoulder. "Vamos, tío. No nos van a joder hoy."

Rico nodded, snapping his rifle up.

Both men opened fire simultaneously, laying down suppressive fire as Edmund and Trevor sprinted for the wrecked car.

A pair of Russian mercenaries had just raised their rifles, aiming straight at Edmund and Trevor—

CRACK. CRACK.

Rico and Lucas dropped them both. The Russians staggered backward, collapsing into the dirt.

Edmund and Trevor dived behind the abandoned car, breathing hard. The battle was chaos, but Edmund's eyes locked onto one figure emerging through the thinning smoke—the officer.

He wasn't just another Russian grunt. His posture was controlled, movements deliberate. But it was the gleaming prosthetic jaw that caught Edmund's attention—cold metal where flesh should have been. The officer wasn't just here to fight—he was leading this entire operation.

Edmund raised his rifle, aiming dead center—

CLICK.

Jammed.

"FUCK!" Edmund cursed, yanking at the charging handle, but it refused to budge.

The officer's cold, unblinking gaze met Edmund's. Then—he moved.

A smoke grenade bounced at Edmund's feet.

Before he could react, the world went white with smoke. A second later, the officer was on him.

The first hit came fast—a brutal elbow to Edmund's ribs. He staggered but swung back, catching the officer across the side of his head. Metal met bone, sending a sharp jolt through Edmund's knuckles.

The officer barely reacted.

Through the haze, Edmund caught a glimpse through the thick smoke of Trevor struggling with another Russian, locked in a vicious brawl. The soldier slammed Trevor against the wreckage, trying to drive a blade into his chest.

Trevor gritted his teeth, fighting back with everything he had, but the Russian was stronger. The blade edged closer. Trevor's muscles strained—he couldn't hold him off much longer.

CRACK.

The Russian soldier's head snapped back as a single shot rang out, a crimson mist spraying into the air. His body stiffened for a fleeting second before crumpling lifelessly to the ground, the knife slipping from his grasp.

Trevor gasped, shoving the dead weight off him, his chest rising and falling in ragged breaths. Across the battlefield, Rico steadied his rifle, exhaling as he tilted his head slightly, catching Trevor's eye. With a smirk, he raised two fingers in a casual salute

Inside the thick smoke, which was so dense that Rico couldn't even see Edmund—let alone take a shot at the officer—the fight raged on. The officer slammed a fist into Edmund's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Edmund fell to one knee, vision blurring. His body screamed in protest, but he refused to stay down.

He lunged forward, driving his shoulder into the officer's torso, sending them both crashing into

the dirt. They rolled, grappling for control, but the officer's strength was monstrous. His knee slammed into Edmund's ribs, his hands wrapping around his throat.

Edmund's vision darkened at the edges. **He had seconds—maybe less.**

His hand scrambled through the dirt, fingers closing around a jagged rock.

With a desperate roar, he swung.

CRACK.

The rock slammed into the officer's jaw.

Something gave.

The officer staggered back, clutching his face. Edmund pushed himself up, panting. That's when he saw it—

The officer's prosthetic jaw had been knocked loose.

Beneath the metal was something horrifying. Flesh torn away, tendons exposed, a grotesque mix of human and machine.

Edmund froze. What the hell was he looking at?

The officer's cold, calculating eyes flicked up—and then he struck.

A brutal punch to Edmund's temple.

The world spun. His body hit the ground. Darkness crept at the edges of his vision. The last thing he saw before blacking out was the officer stepping away, reaching for a device strapped to his wrist.

His distorted voice crackled through the battlefield as the officer uttered into his commlink, "Запускайте их всех. Сейчас." ("Launch them all. Now.")

Far behind enemy lines, dozens of missiles roared into the sky, their fiery trails carving through the darkness like streaks of white-hot light. They moved fast—too fast for the mind to process at first, their distant glow nothing more than eerie fireflies against the black void. But as they arced downward, the weight of what was happening crashed over the squad like a wave.

Still crouched behind cover, Rico's stomach twisted into a knot. His pulse thundered in his ears as his eyes followed the streaks cutting

across the sky. "Dios..." His breath barely came out.

Lucas saw it too, his usually cocky demeanor gone, his face pale in the low light. "Mierda..." His voice was barely above a whisper. His head turned slowly toward Rico, the grim realization sinking in. "Eso va directo a la base."

Trevor took a staggering step forward, his breathing ragged, his gaze locked onto the missiles as if sheer willpower could pull them from the sky. Then, with a distant rumble, the first one made impact.

The explosion tore through the horizon.

Even from miles away, the blast sent tremors through the ground beneath them. A split second later, the night lit up with a deep, fiery glow, the skyline of Yavoriv swallowed by the first wave of destruction. The shockwave hit them a moment later, a deep, gut-punching force that rattled their chests. More explosions followed, each one a brutal punctuation mark in the night.

Rico swallowed hard, forcing down the rising nausea. "They just hit Yavoriv."

Lucas' hands trembled slightly as he gripped his rifle tighter, his jaw clenching. "Los mataron a todos..." His voice was hollow, as if saying the words out loud made them real.

More impacts came, rolling through the distance like a slow, steady drumbeat of devastation. The once-dark skyline of the base was now a mess of fire and rising smoke. Structures that had been standing just minutes ago—barracks, training grounds, everything they had called home—were now engulfed in a growing inferno.

Trevor exhaled sharply, wiping a hand across his face, trying to focus on something, anything, other than the sinking feeling in his gut. He had seen destruction before, but not like this. Not to *his* people.

Yavoriv was burning.

And the man responsible was slipping into the night.

Then—through the thinning smoke ahead—**Rico saw him.**

The officer.

The man responsible for the missile strike.

Stepping back from the wreckage, illuminated by flickering firelight, retreating into the fog.

For the first time, the bastard was fully in sight, stepping back from the wreckage, face illuminated by the flickering firelight.

Rico didn't think. He just acted.

His rifle came up.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

The shots went wide, tearing through debris. The officer jerked behind cover, barely dodging.

Lukas grabbed Rico's shoulder. **"Shit! What are you doing?!"**

But Rico was already moving. **Advancing.** Closing the distance.

Lukas cursed but followed, the two sprinting toward the car wreckage, rifles up, weaving between debris and bodies.

The two advanced fast, Rico still laying down fire, suppressing the officer, forcing him deeper behind cover.

Lucas sprinted forward alongside him, keeping pace. **They reached the car wreck first.** Rico took position, rifle up, scanning for movement.

Lucas barely had time to breathe before he spotted **Edmund, crumpled just ahead, barely moving.**

“Edmund!” Lucas lunged, gripping the back of his vest and hauling him behind the cover of the wreckage.

Edmund groaned, his breath sharp, but he moved—he was alive.

Lucas crouched, checking him over. **"You good?"**

A slow, barely-there nod. **"...Yeah."** His voice was weak, but steady. **Alive.**

Lucas exhaled sharply, glancing past him—**and saw Niko.**

Half-dead, slumped against the wreckage, but his chest still rose, shallow breaths rattling through his body. Blood streaked his face, but his fingers twitched. He was hanging on.

Lucas pressed a hand to Niko's shoulder, firm.
"Still breathing, tio. Hold on."

A few feet away, through the shifting smoke, the Russian officer moved—silent, methodical.

Hunched low behind cover, he pressed a hand to his radio. His voice, calm, deliberate, carried just far enough for them to hear.

"Отправьте дроны." ("**Send the drones.**")

Then—a **high-pitched whine** sliced through the air.

From the northern treelines, **three sleek black drones dropped into view**, rotors slicing through the night like razor blades.

Then—**gunfire**.

RATATATATATATAT.

an endless barrage of machine-gun fire **ripped through the dirt**, chewing into the twisted metal, sending sparks and shrapnel flying. **Shell casings rained down**, glowing red-hot as they piled over the wreckage.

Lucas barely yanked Edmund and Niko lower as another hailstorm of bullets **tore through where their heads had just been**. Rico pressed himself flat against the burning steel, **gripping his rifle like it was his last tether to life**.

The drones **adjusted, arcing around the wreckage, flanking them**.

They weren't just **pinning them down**.

They were closing in.

Lucas **heard it before he saw it**—the shift in their trajectory, the subtle change in the pitch of the rotors, the **inevitable kill shot lining up**.

RATATATATATATAT.

Time slowed.

The three of them sat pressed against the car, breathless, **staring at each other** through the stuttering muzzle flashes.

Lucas flexed his fingers around his rifle. His jaw clenched. He knew.

This was it.

Edmund exhaled slowly. No words. No last orders. **Just understanding.**

Rico locked eyes with them both. **Expression unreadable.**

His rifle was still raised—but **his hands had stopped shaking.**

The drones hovered, adjusting again—**one final time.**

Their **targeting systems locked on.**

RATATATATATATAT.

The low hum. The sound of death.

Lucas swallowed. He almost laughed.

Rico exhaled.

A deep, electric GROWL split through the air.

BWOOOOWWWWW.

The **air warped.**

The drones **seized mid-flight**. Their targeting optics flickered, feeds distorting into static. **Then—systems failed.**

With a sudden jolt, their rotors **stuttered**.

They dropped.

One crashed into the dirt with a dull thud. The other tumbled into a smoldering log, its frame twisting on impact.

Dead.

The battlefield fell into eerie silence.

Through the smoke, **figures emerged—Ukrainian soldiers, moving fast and with precision.**

A soldier stepped forward, lowering the **EDM4S jammer**, its antenna still humming with residual energy. The sound faded into an eerie silence.

And leading them, rifle raised, eyes sharp, was **Valkyrie.**

She scanned the battlefield before locking onto Rico, Lucas, and Edmund, still catching their breath behind the wreckage.

Her gaze lingered for a moment before flicking toward the officer's last known position.

They had arrived just in time.

Shouts rang out as the Ukrainian soldiers rushed forward, weapons at the ready, scanning for threats. Boots pounded against the scorched earth, kicking up dust and debris. Rico pushed himself up, swaying slightly, while Lucas wiped blood from his brow, eyes flicking between the advancing soldiers and Edmund.

Edmund tried to move, to rise, but the weight of exhaustion pulled him down. His breaths came in short, uneven bursts. The figures rushing toward them blurred together, their voices distant, muffled.

Then, everything went dark.

*I*t is March 13, 2022, and the Yavoriv military base lay in ruins, a stark testament to the ferocity of the conflict that had engulfed Ukraine. The once-bustling training grounds were now a smoldering wasteland, the air thick with the acrid scent of burning debris. The attack had been swift and devastating, leaving a trail of destruction and loss in its wake.

In the aftermath, Yulia Tolopa, nicknamed “Valkyrie” and the 3rd Special Purpose Battalion moved with grim determination, extracting the surviving recruits from the rubble. Their faces were etched with exhaustion and resolve, each step a testament to their unwavering commitment to their homeland. The casualties were heavy, but their spirit remained unbroken.

The attack on Yavoriv was not an isolated incident but a calculated move in a broader strategy. Russian forces had launched a series of coordinated strikes across Ukraine, targeting key military installations and infrastructure. The assault on Yavoriv, perilously close to the Polish border, sent shockwaves through the international community, underscoring the escalating nature of the conflict.

By March 15, 2022, the war had reached a critical juncture. Russian troops were inching

closer to Kyiv, engaging in fierce battles on the northeastern and eastern fronts. The Ukrainian resistance was fierce, with both military personnel and civilian volunteers standing firm against the advancing forces. The streets of major cities echoed with the sounds of conflict, each day bringing new challenges and uncertainties.

The international response was a mix of condemnation and cautious support. NATO forces remained on high alert, wary of any spillover that could draw member states directly into the conflict. Humanitarian aid flowed into Ukraine, but the specter of further escalation loomed large.

As the dust settled over Yavoriv, the path ahead remained fraught with peril. The resilience of the Ukrainian people stood as a beacon of hope, but the outcome of the war was far from certain. The battle for Ukraine's sovereignty had entered a new and dangerous phase, with the world watching closely, uncertain of what the next chapter would hold.